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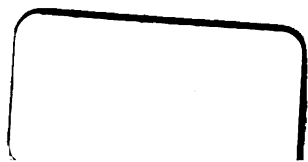
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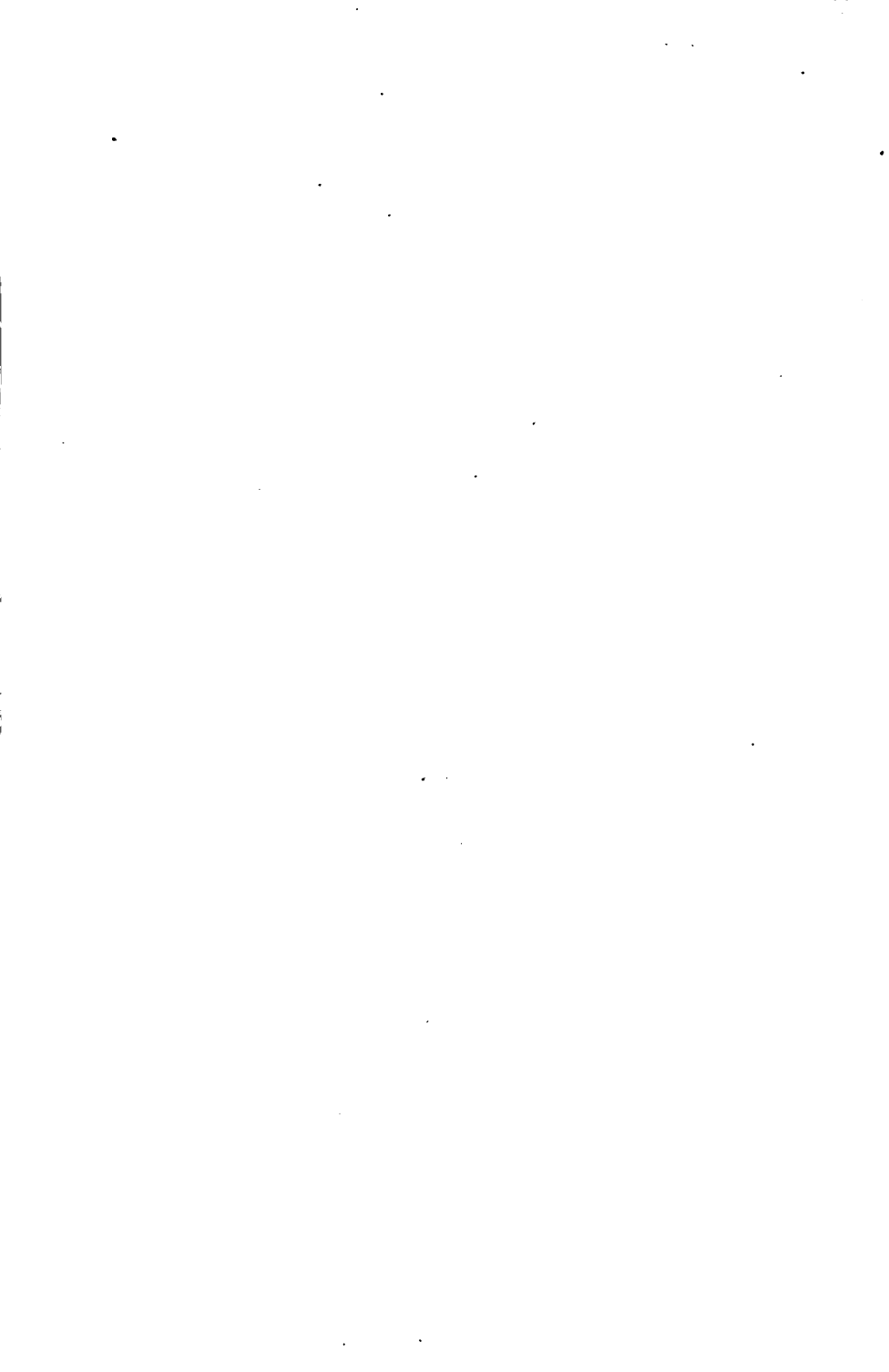


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THE HERO AND THE MAN





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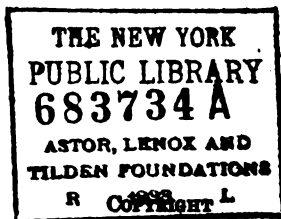
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A. C. McCLURG & CO.

1912



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THE HERO AND THE MAN

CHAPTER I

A STORY OF WHICH ALFRED IS NOT THE HERO

THE readers of the "Modern View" agreed that the magazine gained vastly in interest after Alfred Beverly became its editor; but no one suspected, and Beverly himself did not fully realize, that this added interest was mainly due to the genius of Alice Delamere, the young editorial assistant whose name did not appear. Beverly's strong point was skilful adaptation, not invention; his clear, clever mind was a lens that absorbed and refracted the white light of original thought from other minds. He never recognized the white ray as a fundamental idea — he always called it a "suggestion." From Alice Delamere, who had not yet learned the wisdom of conserving her own talents for her own exclusive service, he drew more useful suggestions than he had ever derived from any other source. She was an exceptional girl, this Alice — a dainty, feminine little creature who selected her gowns with exquisite taste and wore them with inimitable grace, yet gave no unnecessary thought to personal adornment; a girl who wrote with almost masculine power, yet had withal the carefree, unawakened

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heart of a child. It was natural that Beverly should fall in love with her, and equally natural that she should be more startled than thrilled by the avowal of his love. He proved a canny wooer, persistent but not too ardent. Though he failed to win from Alice a positive promise to be his wife, he secured her consent to a provisional engagement which was to be ratified or annulled at the end of a year. Being more than confident of his own merits he hoped for the best as his year's probation drew to a close, and inspired by Alice's generous friendship and aided by her involuntary collaboration he did some of the finest work that the world has ever received from his facile pen.

Returning from a brief business trip he called upon Alice one evening toward the end of that happy and prosperous year, and was met by her with a grave, troubled, questioning look such as he had never before seen in the sunny depths of her frank blue eyes. She did not long leave him in doubt as to the cause of the shadow resting upon her usually gay spirits.

"A letter came to the office last Monday," she said, "from a gentleman named Thompson, living in Wardlaw, Indiana. He states that six months ago he sent us a manuscript, the receipt of which we acknowledged, and that we have never reported upon its availability. I knew that I had never read it myself, so I referred the matter to Miss Smith. She told me that the manuscript was submitted last July, while I was absent on my vacation. She read it first and passed it up to you with a recommendation; you told her that you

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thought it did not quite fit in with our plans for the magazine, and said you would notify the author to that effect yourself. You were sharing my work with Miss Smith."

"Well, I did notify the author. I returned his manuscript," said Beverly sharply. He had changed color while Alice was speaking. He had a face clear-cut as a cameo and sensitive as an opal, with a high breadth of brow that foreboded early baldness, the temples framed by a backward toss of thin auburn curls. To remedy some slight defect of vision his handsome hazel eyes were constantly reinforced by a pair of rimless eyeglasses which set closely into the recession of a perfect Grecian bridge. "Most certainly I returned that manuscript," he reiterated.

"Yes, you put it into a mailing envelope and dropped it into the rejection drawer, as usual," said Alice. She spoke slowly, with a sad austerity that sat strangely upon her youthful countenance; her mind was intent upon something over and above the commonplace statement that she uttered. "Possibly the drawer was overfull at the time; at any rate this manuscript was somehow forced back over the edge and caught in the frame of the desk. There it has been for the past six months, and there it might have remained indefinitely if Miss Smith had not taken the drawer out yesterday when searching for traces of the manuscript."

"A singular accident," commented Beverly after a brief silence. "I'm extremely sorry that poor

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Thompson has been kept waiting so long for his rejection. I trust you wrote him one of your best letters. You always know how to pour balm on wounded feelings and this is certainly a case demanding tactful treatment."

"I have not written yet. The manuscript was so badly torn by the twist between the desk and the drawer that it was necessary to mend several pages. I—have read it, Alfred. Here it is." She put out one hand and took from the table at her elbow a folded document which had been neatly repaired with strips of tissue.

"You have read it?" Beverly repeated smoothly. "That was taking unnecessary trouble, my dear."

"Perhaps I exceeded my authority, but I did not feel that it was exactly a trespass. You have always admitted me to your confidence in these matters. You see, Miss Smith liked this essay when she read it last summer, and she said that you liked it, too, only you did not care to give it space just then. I thought that if it impressed me favorably I would try to persuade you to publish it after all. Will you listen while I read it to you, now?"

If his first impulse was to refuse, he thought better of it. "Certainly, Alice," he said, smiling; and seated beside her he gave courteous attention while she read the paper from beginning to end. At its conclusion she looked up at him earnestly.

"There is a fine idea in this essay," she said. "I cannot understand why you rejected it."

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His only reply was a slight lift of the brows.

Alice went on with evident effort, "We often meet with odd coincidences in authorship; we all know how possible it is to read a thing, forget it, and then recall it in some new connection without recalling its source. Is this a case in point? If you compare Mr. Thompson's article with that one of yours that I liked so much when you showed me your first sketch of it—the one that is to appear in the "Autocrat"—can't you see that they are almost identical? Alfred, I am saying this, not to accuse you, but to warn you. I cannot be silent while you do yourself injustice and injury. Either Mr. Thompson's idea came back to you in such a way that you thought it was your own, or else—" She paused.

"Or else I stole it outright!" laughed Beverly. "My dear girl, you are taking this much too seriously." He regretted the words as soon as they were spoken. Looking through Alice's lucent eyes, as through a lighted vestibule, into the judgment hall of her impeccable literary conscience, he perceived that his case could not be won by mere bravado. "Let us be perfectly frank with each other," he said in an altered tone. "You think I borrowed from Thompson?"

"Yes," she said reluctantly.

"Well, so I did. And very likely Thompson himself was a borrower—the central idea of his production may have occurred to a dozen men before he hit upon it. What is 'original thought,' by the way? Is it a something created out of nothing? Not at all. It

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is the offshoot of an older growth, or else it is the restoration of a thing disused or outworn. It is a process, not an element. Even if we grant its elemental character we may liken it to—well, to a winged seed which lights, we'll say, in my little garden. I recognize its potentiality, sow it in a favorable situation, train the growing plant; and when it is full grown, to whom does it belong?—to me, or to the owner of the plant from which the seed took its flight? The answer is obvious. A workable idea is like any other opportunity—it belongs to the man who makes the best use of it. Now, our good friend Thompson has somehow captured a fugitive idea which he does not know how to use, and in his hands it is as good as lost to the world. I saw this when I read the essay last summer, but I also saw that revision meant reconstruction, and that the reconstructed article would be far more mine than Thompson's—so what could I do? It was useless to suggest that the author rewrite the thing himself, because if he had known how to write effectively he would have done so in the first place. I returned the manuscript—or supposed that I did—and the matter passed quite out of my mind. When I took up a somewhat similar line of thought, lately, I was aided by suggestions from several sources; not all my material was obtained from Mr. Thompson. I no more put forth the empty claim of being always and invariably 'original,' than I admit the charge of being a mere copyist. My treatment of this theme has made it rightfully my own. Our Hoosier friend would

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concede as much himself — would see that I have done a thing which he was incapable of doing.”

“Oh, Alfred!” exclaimed Alice. “This is the idlest sophistry.”

She was looking at him with sorrowful indignation. He checked the retort that rose to his lips, knowing that he could not afford to quarrel with her over a five-page magazine article.

“You are severe,” he said quietly. “I have stated my view of the case in explicit terms. Give me your cogent reasoning in exchange for my idle sophistry, and tell me what I should have done.”

“There is but one thing for you to do now.”

“And that is? —”

“Withdraw your paper from publication in the ‘Autocrat.’”

He had expected this, and his reply was ready. “I’ll do so,” he said; and as he saw the shadow lift from her face he hastened to pursue the advantage he had gained. “Little Puritan! Are your scruples satisfied?” he demanded. “I would do anything on earth to please you, Alice.”

He took both her hands in his. She drew back, the cloud once more drifting across the blue brightness of her eyes.

“You should do this because it is *right*, and not just to please me,” she said.

“Pray, where’s the difference? That which pleases you is right. That which is right pleases you. It reads the same either way.”

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She was silent, while his gaze dwelt upon the tinted fairness of her cheek and the pure, unlined tablet of her brow. He looked down at the sweet red mouth that had allured and tantalized him in countless changes of expression — the lips that could be mobile in laughter or sharply compressed in serious thought, wreathed in dimpling mischief or drooping pensively as now. . . . He drew her closer and bent his face to hers.

"Please don't, Alfred," she said, dropping her head childishly to avoid the caress.

"You're a capricious little witch!" he cried in a sudden flame of impatience. "You own that you care for me as you never cared for any one else, you let me hold your hands in mine, like this, you let me lay my cheek against your hair, so; yet never once have you given me your lips to kiss. Do you think it's fair to treat me so?"

"Of course it is fair! You agreed to the terms of our engagement; for the present we are nothing more than good friends. And I am not 'capricious.' Some day, if — that is, *when* I do let you kiss me, you'll understand why I did n't allow it before."

Partially pacified by the blush and the dimple that accompanied the words, Beverly threw off his futile impatience with a slight shrug. For the remainder of the evening he addressed himself to effacing from Alice's mind the unfavorable impression produced by his appropriation of the Indiana man's idea; yet all the while he felt that he was not gaining much against the current

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of her disapprobation. As he took leave of her he impulsively challenged her unspoken thought.

"Alice, you are not satisfied with me, and I can't rest until I have squared myself in your estimation. What would you have me do, more than I have already promised? If it is n't enough to kill my 'Autocrat' article, I'm willing to go further. Speak your wish and it becomes my law on the instant. I am your loyal subject and devoted slave." He was smiling; as he said the words "subject" and "slave," he looked every inch a king; the hand at his side might have clasped a jewelled sword hilt gracefully.

"If I ask you to go further, Alfred, it is for your own sake — though it would be an act of generosity, too —"

"Well, dear?"

"Publish Mr. Thompson's article in the 'Modern View.'"

For the second time his quick perception overtook her speech. "It shall be done," he answered, with a bow. "Your wish prevails."

The next issue of the "Autocrat" contained a substitute for Beverly's intended contribution, and three months later Mr. Thompson's article appeared in the "Modern View." But the incident had given Alice Delamere the key to many hitherto unsuspected possibilities of her lover's subtle yet shallow nature and try as she might, she could not reinstate Alfred in the place he had formerly occupied in her good opinion. Their provisional engagement ended when she severed her

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editorial connection with the magazine, and though they still met on social occasions — they had so many friendships in common, they so often dined at the same houses and attended the same receptions, that they could not drop entirely out of each other's sight, separated in spirit though they were — they passed like ships in mid-ocean, Beverly receiving from his former assistant editor nothing more than the recognition due to an old acquaintance. His interest in the "Modern View" languished after the withdrawal of Alice's illuminating companionship; he soon gave the magazine into other hands, and entered a new sphere of activity as lecturer on literary criticism, a vocation toward which choice had long been urging him and in which he met with flattering success.

Alice also won success through the pages of the "Aurora," as a writer of short essays and trenchant verse and later as a reviewer whose criticisms, while not always relished by the authors of the books reviewed, made excellent reading for disinterested persons. Satire was a newly acquired weapon in her hand, and she was still young enough to use it somewhat recklessly; but her sharp sayings never wounded deeply nor rankled long, because no one took them seriously. It cannot be said, however, that she appeared at her best while passing through this second stage of disillusion.

Then came an epochal experience — the writing of her first novel, "Ardietta." It was a peculiarly fortuitous experience. Alice did not begin by saying to

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herself, "I will write a novel"; the story came unbidden, telling itself to her inner consciousness with persistent haunting of her leisure hours, and completing its ideal construction before one word of it had been set down on paper. The heroine was Alice herself, in all temperamental essentials, though sublimated by gracious imaginary environment; step by step the author retraced her own girlhood and strewed the path with flowers for this Other-self — this charming Ardietta who was destined to become the most popular fiction-heroine of the hour. The hero who shared with Ardietta the fair land of heart's-desire was a gallant youth as different as possible from Alfred Beverly, strong in all the qualities that Beverly conspicuously lacked, antipodal to him in faults no less than in virtues. And as the story grew, antithetically founding fiction upon fact, it built faith upon unfaith in the heart of Alice Delamere.

Alice put the finished manuscript away, content with the mere joy of having written it, and not until months afterward did she seriously consider its publication. She knew that it was far too good a piece of fiction to be left in a locked drawer; yet if published, it would be read by Alfred Beverly and egoistically interpreted by him in the light of his own past relation to Alice. How to give the book to the public without giving it to this one man — that was the problem. Alice chose the only course that seemed to offer a solution of the difficulty. When 'Ardietta' at length appeared in print its authorship was ascribed to an apocryphal

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personage named Sarah Gray. Under protest, Miss Delamere's publisher yielded to the stipulation that her first work of prose fiction should go forth, if at all, unassisted by previous successes in the field of essay and criticism; and being a resourceful publisher he took care that the book lost nothing by the mystery that enveloped its author. Month after month, "Ardietta" held first place among the best sellers, favored alike by fortune and misfortune — for when the seventh imprint was in press Miss Delamere fell ill with a fever, and while the novel-reading public watched anxiously for bulletins from the bedside of Sarah Gray the eighth and ninth editions sold faster than they could be issued. And when on a sunny April morning a wan little shadow of Alice Delamere came back to the world of living things, Sarah Gray's novel was just completing its one hundred and fiftieth thousand.

CHAPTER II

WESTWARD WITH AUNT JULIA

ROUSING herself from the apathy of convalescence, Alice took up the burden of successful authorship and began planning the new novel which, months before, she had agreed to have ready for publication in the early autumn. She dedicated the summer to the writing of this novel, resisting many temptations to join friends who were already flitting to seaside and mountains. When she left New York late in June, her destination was a town named Rothney — a mere dot on the map of a certain north-western State, and the most unlikely place she could have chosen for her summer sojourn. Her choice had been made impulsively, after receiving a letter from her mother's old friend, Mrs. Bowen — the "Aunt" Julia Bowen of Alice's earliest memory. The Bowens and Delameres had formerly lived in the same town in New York; after Aunt Julia and Uncle Aaron migrated to the Northwest, an occasional letter from the former had found its way back to the orphan daughter of the Delameres. This latest message, however, came unexpectedly from Alice's native town in western New York.

"Two months ago," wrote Aunt Julia, "I laid my

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dear husband in our family burial lot, close by where your pa and ma lie buried. It was his wish to be laid here in Fielding. I have been staying here since, visiting round among the friends, and expect to go home in a couple of weeks. There will be plenty for me to do after I get back, settling my husband's affairs and paying the debts. Mr. Bowen owned quite a little land, but it was all mortgaged. I would like to sell off everything if I could, but Mr. Fenton says not. He says I must keep my house at Willow Branch and a quarter-section of land for my home. I don't know yet just what I will do. Can't you come out and make me a visit this Summer? You know you have been promising to come for years. You say you are going to find some quiet place and settle down to write another book. It don't seem to me that you ought to do this so soon after such a hard fit of sickness, but if your mind is set on working I should think you could write as well at Willow Branch as anywhere. It's two miles from town, you know, and the house sets a long ways back from the road. I guess you would find it quiet enough."

Aunt Julia's invitation was accepted at once, and a week later the two women travelled together from Fielding toward Rothney. Mrs. Bowen, who suffered an anxious flurry over each change of cars, drew a profound sigh of relief when she found herself established beside Alice in the sumptuous day coach of the trans-continental flier that had picked them up at Grantham to convey them over the short final stage of their

Westward with Aunt Julia

journey. She had never missed a train in her life, but the fear of doing so had been the attendant spectre of her infrequent travelling.

"The worst's over, now," she said. "We'll be at Rothney in an hour. Johnny will meet us at the station, and he'll see that we get out to Willow Branch all right." She reached under her bonnet strings to repair an imaginary disarray of neatly brushed hair and then folded her hands reposefully in her lap. She was a buxom little woman with a fresh and comely countenance that belied her sixty-five years, her elderly robustness presenting a marked contrast to the youthful fragility of the girl at her side.

Alice glanced up, smiling slightly at the reference to "Johnny." "There!" she exclaimed. "I have n't finished reading what Mr. Fenton has to say about Rothney." She opened her handbag and took therefrom a booklet that Mrs. Bowen had given her the day before. It was a handsome booklet, printed on heavy paper with a sheaf of wheat embossed in pale green on the antique linen cover and a design of wheat-heads traced in shadowy outline across the top of each page. In and out among numerous illustrations ran a succinct history of Rothney, with a few pointed paragraphs setting forth its advantages as a field for investment, and in conclusion the reader was referred for further information to the Rothney Land & Investment Company, John Fenton, Mgr. "He has a good literary style—a place for every word, and every word in its place," observed Alice. "He must believe that

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advertising pays, no matter what it costs. This booklet is artistic, and evidently quite expensive."

"That's the way Johnny does things. I guess he thinks if a thing's worth doing at all, it's worth doing well."

"I suppose he is an old resident of Rothney."

"Well, yes, as much so as anybody. He had n't been here very long before Mr. Bowen and I came, but he'd spent some time on a ranch in Wardner County before that, and had been off to Europe and come back again; it's about eighteen years since he first came to the Northwest. So far's I knew he has n't any relatives, except some cousins back in New England. It's such a pity that he's never married. I don't think much of old bachelors as a rule, but Johnny's different from most of 'em — he'd make the best kind of a husband. He says if he'd ever been going to get married he'd 've done it long ago. Sometimes I've thought he had a sort of fancy for Mad'line Allingham, but I don't know — she's 'most too young for him. She's the only child of Loudon B. Allingham, who is president of the R. L. & I."

"The — what? Oh, of course — Rothney Land & Investment Company."

"Yes. Everybody 'round here calls it the R. L. & I. Mad'line and her father live at a hotel in Minneapolis, but she's been away to school all the time till this year. She was only a baby when her mother died. Dave Stanley, who owns Riverside, the big farm south of town — I guess there's a picture of it in the booklet?"

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"Here it is," said Alice, turning to the view of a vast grain field bisected by a long line of binders that stretched away to infinity under a billowy summer sky. " 'Harvest scene at Riverside, one of the largest farms still being operated by private capital in the State.' "

"Well, Dave Stanley married Mrs. Allingham's youngest sister. Mad'line's up here pretty often, vis'iting her aunt."

Alice went on turning the leaves of the booklet and Mrs. Bowen continued her illuminating comments, while the dusky landscape flew past the car window like a whirling gray disk. Half-way around the horizon the sunset afterglow met the earth's black rim in a clean curve that remained unalterably remote as the train rushed toward it, except for one point in the north at which the receding distance was arrested by two grain elevators that rose like high-shouldered sentinels against the sky.

"Yes, the Hotel Kenney is a pretty good building," admitted Mrs. Bowen, when Alice paused at the somewhat flattered likeness of Rothney's chief hostelry — a frame structure cleverly counterfeiting stone, with a row of fictitiously massive pillars supporting a balcony on which were ranged clipped bay-trees in tubs. "I don't think it looks *quite* as well as the picture, but it's a good, stout building and well kept up. Ed Kenney cert'nly knows how to run a hotel and make it pop'lar with the trav'ling men."

"Is he the same man whose name is given here as treasurer of the R. L. & I.?" inquired Alice.

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Mrs. Bowen nodded gravely. "He's the only Kenney there is, and one of his kind is about enough," she replied. "Not but what Ed's smart, and a real good manager. He's mayor of the city just now, too. He was the first mayor we had, after we got our charter, and he allowed so much gambling and liquor-selling and so on, that the people started a reform movement and elected John Fenton next time. While Johnny was in office he got the town pretty well cleaned up. He even closed that scand'lous resort out on North Second Street, that nobody else'd dared touch. Everybody b'lieved that Ed Kenney was the real proprietor of the place and was running it in connection with his hotel business, but there was n't enough evidence to prove it. Ed did n't fight Johnny openly, but he began working against the reform movement — 'Brother Fenton's Sunday-school class,' he called it — and he got so many of the business men on his side that when he ran again for mayor, against Johnny, he was elected. He's held office over a year, now, and the town is going from bad to worse. They do say there's more protected vice in Rothney than you'll find in any other town of its size in the State."

"I should think the relations between Mr. Fenton and Mr. Kenney must be rather strained."

"Oh, they don't have any more to do with each other than they have to — at least, Johnny don't. Still, they seem to get along smooth enough in the R. L. & I. As I said before, Ed's smart, and I guess he's perfectly honest when it comes to money matters; of

Westward with Aunt Julia

course, he must be, or Johnny would n't have any dealings with him. We'll soon be at Rothney, Alice. It's the next stop."

Mrs. Bowen waved her hand toward the elevators, which now loomed large against a glimmer of artificial lights superimposed upon the rosy afterglow. The train thundered across a small bridge, intoning a deep-throated whistle, and by the time it had pounded out another half mile on its long course toward the western sea, the arc lights of Rothney's main street had become discernible, their splintery radiance revealing wooden roofs with chubby box elders cropping up among the buildings. Sliding at slackened speed past lines of empty freight cars, the flier stopped in the shadow of the elevators, its Titanic locomotive towering above the station roof as it panted beside the platform.

The usual idlers were on hand to witness the passing of the big train, while among them stood a man easily distinguishable from his neighbors at first glance. It must have been some fourth dimension of personality that gave him prominence, for while possibly a trifle taller, broader, and heavier than the average man, he was too well proportioned to be physically conspicuous. His attitude expressed the quiescence of reserve power; there was potential force in his square, passive shoulders, in the descending lines from chin to neck, even in the carelessly bent arm and wrist as the knuckles of one closed hand rested on his hip. Without knowing his history it was easy to find evidences of early athletic training, and not difficult to imagine that

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he had once been a gridiron hero. "That's Johnny!" exclaimed Mrs. Bowen, descrying him through the car window as she grasped her bag and umbrella and prepared to arise. To Alice the words were corroborative rather than informing; she had seen the gentleman before Mrs. Bowen had, and in some inexplicable way she had known at once who he was.

He welcomed Mrs. Bowen cordially, speaking in a clear, resonant voice that might have seemed loud if it had been less agreeably modulated. He acknowledged his introduction to Miss Delamere in a few suitable words, and there was much kindness in the glance that he bent upon the small, pale face framed by the short chestnut curls. His eyes had a ready sparkle and a keen, candid outlook. He escorted the ladies down the platform, walking at Mrs. Bowen's side and addressing his remarks chiefly to her.

"I am sorry that I can't drive you out to Willow Branch myself," he said. "I could have done so if the flier had been on time. We are having an important council meeting to-night; I left when I heard the train whistle for Dickson's Coulee, but I must go right back. Chan is here, with Sally and the phaeton, and Otto will take charge of the trunks. Chan can drive for you if you like, or he can go back in the wagon with Otto."

"He may's well go in the wagon, Johnny — he can't drive Sally any better than I can. How's Chan getting along nowadays?"

"Fairly well — thin as a rail, and growing too fast

Westward with Aunt Julia

for his strength, but on the whole I think his health is improving. His record at school shows some improvement, too. I am very grateful to you for inviting him to spend the summer vacation at Willow Branch — it helps me out of a difficulty. I didn't wish to send him too far away, yet I didn't want him in Rotherney; there would be nothing for him to do, in town, except get into mischief."

"It'll be much better for him at the farm. Has Christine Larson decided that she can stay with me all summer?"

"Oh, yes. She and Ole are not to be married until November, I believe. She can stay as long as you need her, or until you can get some one else."

"That's good! She's such a nice girl, and so different from ordinary hired help."

The end of the platform was reached as Mrs. Bowen spoke. Her little phaeton and sleek brown horse stood waiting at the steps, and lounging at Sally's head was a lean, overgrown boy about eleven years of age. The boy edged forward and gave a limp shake to Mrs. Bowen's proffered hand, backing off precipitately after the greeting had been accomplished and running away to join Otto. He congratulated himself upon his escape from riding home in the phaeton, foreseeing that he would not be permitted to drive, and that he would have to sit on the floor of the vehicle with his chin on his knees and his eyes on a level with the dashboard, or else — unspeakable humiliation! — sit in Mrs. Bowen's lap.

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"I'll be out to see you to-morrow," said John Fenton, as he handed Mrs. Bowen and her silent young companion into the phaeton and carefully tucked in the dust robe. "I may stop at Willow Branch quite often, while I am superintending that work at the Ward Farm — it will be right on my road."

He stepped back with a brief, graceful bow, and watched the phaeton turn from the platform. The beam from an arc lamp, falling directly upon Miss Delamere's face, showed him that Mrs. Bowen's quiet little friend was not, as he had supposed, a schoolgirl of fifteen or thereabouts, but a young woman well past twenty. Surprise reacted quickly in amusement at his own expense. "It's her own fault, though. She has no business to wear her hair in short curls — it's very misleading. Wonder why she does it?"

He did not pursue the speculation. Leaving the station he took a short-cut across the yard of the Farmers' Mill, and in five minutes he was back at the council meeting, considering bids for two thousand square yards of cement sidewalk; and as he was a practical man who never magnified trifles, it is probable that the misleading curls were speedily forgotten.

Mrs. Bowen crossed the railroad tracks, on the alert for sudden signs of motivity among the box cars that strung out on either hand, but once safely clear of the branching steel rails, she flapped the reins emphatically, the old brown mare meanwhile following the predetermined tenor of her way. "Go 'long, Sally! Go 'long, now, do!" urged Mrs. Bowen. Sally tossed her head

Westward with Aunt Julia

and paced slowly forward, turning the next corner of her own accord and stalking majestically up Main Street; not until the electric glare of the town had been left behind did she relax into her customary road gait, combining the appearance of a trot with the speed of a walk, while Mrs. Bowen, holding the reins at an angle of forty-five degrees and jerking them gently, continued to cherish the innocent illusion that she was "driving" the placid animal.

The road slipped backward like a smooth belt under the slowly-turning wheels. A shower had passed that way late in the afternoon, leaving the air redolent of moist earth and freshened wayside grasses; along the lane that led from the road to the house at Willow Branch, the double row of cottonwoods shook down a few hoarded raindrops, but above their slender tops the stars were shining. To right and left were fields, and beyond them other fields, all intensely dark yet peculiarly distinct in the starlight. Alice Delamere found a strange exhilaration in the chill sweetness of the northern summer night; breathing the fragrance of good brown earth and springing green grain, she felt suddenly and mysteriously at home in the undiscovered country to which mere chance had guided her; the question that had followed her throughout the journey from New York, "Why in the world am I going to Rothney?" seemed answered once for all. "I believe it is *the* place for me," she thought. "I believe that here, if anywhere, I can rise to my highest possibilities, and write my very best!"

CHAPTER III

IN WHICH ALICE DOES NOT BUY A FARM

THE first days at Willow Branch were all very much alike — long hours of brilliant sunshine culminating in glorious sunsets. Alice devoted the early part of each day to work; every afternoon some neighbor dropped in to call informally on Mrs. Bowen and her guest; every evening there was a drive across the prairie; every night added a cipher of dreamless repose to the value of passing time, and every awakening revealed a world that seemed to have been new-created since yesterday.

“I declare, Alice, you’re beginning to pick up already!” said Mrs. Bowen. “You’ve really got a little color in your cheeks this morning.”

“What else can you expect, when you do so much to make me comfortable and happy?” smiled Alice. “It seems to me that I never felt quite so thoroughly at home in my life — certainly not since my childhood. Nowadays, when I go off for a vacation trip, I always carry with me the consciousness of being absent from New York, but here, I don’t feel particularly absent from anywhere — I only feel *present*, and very much so.”

If Aunt Julia’s matter-of-fact mind failed wholly to

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grasp Alice's whimsical meaning, her warm heart supplied the deficiency. "Well, my dear, I'm sure it's the greatest comfort to ~~me~~ to have you here," she replied.

But while retaining to the full her sense of personal harmony with her surroundings, Alice knew that she was *not* "writing her very best"; her novel did not develop as she had hoped that it might, though the plot was fairly good and the heroine all that could be desired. The story was halted at the outset by the unexpected difficulty of obtaining a satisfactory hero; after trying several real men as models, and finding none of them quite suited to Laura, the heroine, Alice discarded them all and hastily sketched a purely imaginary character who went through his first scene like a substitute actor mechanically reading the lines of an absent principal. His name was Clarence. Alice had never liked the name, which had apparently attached itself to this hero without her full knowledge or consent; for half a day she strove to call him James, but as he would not answer to the alias the original name was allowed to stand. "After all, it is good enough for such as he," she thought.

Naturally her mind dwelt now and then upon the ease and spontaneity with which she had written "*Ardietta*," and she wondered which should be taken as the real measure of her ability, that first novel or this second one. "Was I deceived by a 'lying prophecy' when I obeyed the call to write fiction?" she asked herself. "Surely, if I were a true novelist I should not find it

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so difficult to manage a hero. None of the characters in 'Ardietta' gave me the slightest trouble."

Not being easily discouraged, she persevered in her task, hoping from day to day that a clearer light might dawn upon her path. At times, it is true, her whole soul rebelled against the publisher's contract that bound her to spend the golden summer hours in analyzing and portraying the joys and sorrows, loves and hates, of imaginary men and women, when all that she desired was to be left in peace to live her own life — or better still, to vegetate in irresponsible idleness. She envied the sturdily growing grain, the twinkling, rustling cottonwoods, the swift-winged, silver-throated meadow larks — they did not have to write novels! They lived the simple poem of their own unthinking existence, without obligation to record its impressions or to register its phenomena.

Alice did not, however, allow her own compulsory literary labor nor her mutinous thoughts thereon to exclude an interest in Aunt Julia's business anxieties, upon which she really expended more studied consideration than Aunt Julia gave to them herself; and when, one day, her cogitations crystallized into a definite plan of action, she borrowed Sally and the phaeton and drove to town alone, her mind busily revolving her project as she jogged along.

She arrived in Rothney at the mid-afternoon hour when the activity of the town reached its lowest ebb. No trains were coming or going; post office and railway station were taking a siesta; Main Street merchants

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found leisure to gossip across the counter with stray customers; from the new Morrison Block, the First Methodist Church, and Smith's department store the ring of carpenter's hammer and stone-mason's chisel came in a subdued and drowsy murmur; the townhall gazed upon the scene with its false clock-face — painted to represent ten minutes past nine — as if time itself had ceased to revolve. Alice attended to a few errands for Mrs. Bowen and then drove to the Grand Opera House, a long, ungainly building facing the townhall and diagonally opposite the Hotel Kenney. The opera house derived its titular status from a barn-like auditorium on the second floor in which were held all local entertainments and public meetings, and in which traveling stock companies occasionally trod the boards, while on Sundays the Methodist minister stood in front of the faded drop-curtain and preached to his temporarily houseless congregation.

The ground floor of the opera house contained the offices of the Rothney Land & Investment Company and several tributary concerns. Alice found work being done here if nowhere else in town; as she passed along the corridor leading to the front suite she was greeted by the clack of typewriters, the loud staccato of an adding machine, and the irregular snapping of a stock-ticker. When she entered the large general office of the R. L. & I., she was met at once by Dick Harvey, the other three clerks merely glancing at her across the tops of their desks. It was tacitly understood that the reception of lady clients devolved upon Dick,

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who was a handsome youth and a model of deportment.

"Mr. Fenton is engaged at present, but I think he'll soon be at leisure," said Dick, gracefully placing a chair for Miss Delamere. He then stepped to the open door of the general manager's private office with the impersonal announcement, "A lady to see you, Mr. Fenton," and returned to his typewriting.

There was a trivial but not altogether negligible significance in the fact that the door of John Fenton's private office stood wide open much of the time; secret consultations and confidential transactions were not at all in the general manager's line. The office was a bare, well-lighted room containing only the essentials of furniture; the dull plaster walls were hung with State and township maps and framed bits of scenery along the route of western railroads. Glancing through the doorway Alice Delamere contrasted the room with the sumptuous possibilities of the suite that the Rothney Land & Investment Company was to occupy in the new Morrison Block next fall; only last evening Fenton had showed her some decorator's designs for his own future sanctum and had discussed, with the earnestness and warmth of a clever art amateur, the *motif* of the frieze and the color scheme that must be carried out in the rugs for the floor. She had marvelled at the fastidious taste he then exhibited — it had seemed so different from the practical, almost utilitarian ideas with which she had at first credited him — and she smiled now as she observed him swung back in the old swivel-

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chair before the old roll-top desk, smoking an excellent cigar, and apparently quite happy in his shabby surroundings. Opposite him sat an elderly farmer who talked in a drawling monotone with a strong Scandinavian accent, against which Fenton's clear-cut, audible English seemed more than usually incisive. Fenton brought the interview to a close soon after Dick's announcement of a lady's presence in the office, but there was no haste in his dismissal of the old farmer; he walked to the door with the man, and bowed to Alice with a flash of surprise upon perceiving who she was.

He invited her into the office, laid aside his cigar, and awaited his visitor's pleasure with a look of friendly inquiry. He was in fact much interested to hear what had brought Miss Alice Delamere to the office of the R. L. & I.

She stated her business immediately. "Mr. Fenton, I have some money to invest. I had been advised to buy farm lands or farm mortgages, but had not decided upon an investment at the time I came West. Mrs. Bowen wishes to sell Willow Branch, and I should like to buy the place if you think well of the idea."

"Have you talked it over with Mrs. Bowen?"

"No. I thought it wiser to consult you first. I understand that you have advised Mrs. Bowen not to sell the farm."

"So I have. She has already lost so much money in satisfying the more urgent claims against the estate that I think she ought to hold on to every acre of uncumbered property that is left."

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"This is your only reason for advising against the sale?"

"It's a sufficient reason," said Fenton, smiling.

Alice pondered the reply for a moment, and then observed, "She wishes to raise money to pay off the mortgage on her town lots in Rothney."

"Altogether unnecessary!" retorted Fenton. "I hold that mortgage myself, and it is n't worrying me."

"Mrs. Bowen appreciates your kindness in offering to carry the mortgage for her, but there are two sides to the question. You have probably discovered, long before this, that she is no financier — it was n't necessary for her to wrestle with financial problems while Mr. Bowen lived. She is inclined to worry most over the things that are really the least formidable. She will not be satisfied until every dollar of her husband's indebtedness — including the mortgage on those Rothney lots — has been paid. Since she has determined to sell the roof from over her own head, she will do it sooner or later, and I might as well be the purchaser as any one."

"A very good argument," said Fenton, laughing outright this time. "Well, Miss Delamere, what would be your plan in reference to Willow Branch? Would you expect to run the place yourself?" The twinkle in his eye anticipated her response.

"No, I suppose I should hire a manager. Is n't that what people usually do?"

"Some people. Personally I have n't much opinion of 'managed' farms and nonresident owners. You see,

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speculative agriculture is out of date. Besides, Willow Branch is an exceptional case; the land is a mere remnant of the original tract, while the buildings are on a scale adequate to the working of two or three sections. Mr. Bowen had two thousand acres at one time. Then, too, the house is a larger and better one than the average small farmer cares to live in or is willing to pay for; yet the value of the improvements being what it is, Mrs. Bowen cannot afford to sell at too low a figure. So there you are—it is neither one thing nor the other, neither a big farm nor a little one. In buying it you would either have to pay Mrs. Bowen less than the property is worth to her or more than it is worth to yourself. I could n't advise such a deal from any point of view."

"If I bought at Mrs. Bowen's price, and then rented the farm to some one, would *that* pay?"

"Decidedly not. With your ignorance of practical farming—" he paused interrogatively.

"Yes?" said Alice.

"You would be at the mercy of your tenant, and if he were a fair specimen of his kind he would have worked your land to death by the time his lease was up. No, Miss Delamere, it would n't do at all."

"Then—suppose—" she hesitated. "Suppose I should buy Willow Branch, and—and should make some arrangement by which Mrs. Bowen could go on living there as in the past, and keep Otto Erickson to manage the land—" She paused again; this last suggestion was the most impractical that she had yet

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offered, but raising her eyes slowly to Fenton's face, she saw his quizzical smile flash into sudden gravity and she knew that he had divined her motive and sympathized with it. She had come to him, that day, with a misty little doubt of his disinterestedness, but the mist vanished at his look. "Mr. Fenton," she went on, impulsively, "I may as well tell you that my only object is to help Mrs. Bowen. I have been distressed by what I have learned of her affairs. I fear she will be left in very straitened circumstances — perhaps in actual want. I *must* do something — she was my mother's best friend, longer ago than I can remember. She has never been obliged to practise rigid economy and it is too late for her to begin now; she has n't the least idea, as yet, how it will seem to be deprived of the simple little comforts and luxuries that she has enjoyed all her life. And she is sixty-five years old."

"Yes," nodded Fenton, seriously. "That is all true."

"And it is impossible to offer aid outright. Aunt Ju — Mrs. Bowen is very proud. It is n't false pride, either — it's the pride of lifelong independence. She has always given to others far more than she has received from any one, and she can't imagine such a thing as being under obligation to her friends."

"Yes," said Fenton again. "Her pride has been an obstacle to the adjustment of her husband's affairs. Mr. Bowen — you knew him, I daresay?"

"When I was a little girl, in Fielding."

"Well, he was a fine old gentleman, but he became

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very peculiar in his latter days. Undoubtedly his trouble was a form of paresis, though it affected him only in certain ways. In most things he was as rational as anybody, but he went absolutely wild in some of his business dealings. Why, some of the contracts he made could have been set aside easily on the ground of incompetency. Mrs. Bowen would n't consent to that; she would reduce herself to penury before she would admit that her husband was incompetent, and as a consequence she has been victimized by two or three unscrupulous men who took advantage of Mr. Bowen's condition. She has insisted on paying every claim, down to the last cent. Oh, of course, in a way I respect her feeling in the matter. All the same, my patience has been tried to the limit sometimes." Fenton smiled as he spoke; Alice's face dimpled in response, and thus these two strangers met understandingly on the common ground of long acquaintance with "Aunt Julia." "Mrs. Bowen has many friends who would gladly help her if they knew how," Fenton continued, "but as you just said yourself, it won't do to offer assistance outright. That is why I have delayed canceling the mortgage on those Rothney lots—I have thought it wiser to go slow. Of course I intend to cancel it later."

"Will it be any more practical for you to lose that money than for me to buy Willow Branch?"

"Certainly. The cases are not parallel. My loss would be negative, yours positive. I don't need the money I loaned Aaron Bowen five years ago—have

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never missed it and can well afford to lose it. If Mrs. Bowen will consent to go on living quietly at Willow Branch, her home will be assured and a little income besides. She will never come to want so long as I am above ground—I give you my word for that, Miss Delamere.”

It was impossible to doubt the forthright truthfulness of this declaration. In all sincerity Alice replied, “I am sure of it, Mr. Fenton;” and after a moment, “Still, that does not give me a chance to do my share. I shall be so far away, I shall not know, half the time, how Mrs. Bowen is faring. She would never put her troubles into a letter.”

“In that case, I will see that you are informed,” said Fenton. “And if I should hit upon any scheme for bettering Mrs. Bowen’s fortunes you shall have a share in it—I promise to let you in on the ground floor. Is it a bargain?”

“Done!” said Alice. But the dimple vanished from her cheek as quickly as it had appeared, and for several moments she sat gravely meditating, her bright eyes lowered. It is not given to many women to be charming without self-consciousness—perhaps it is too much to expect of the average woman—but Alice Delamere certainly possessed the gift. It was possible for her to look bewitching—as at this moment—and yet to be profoundly unaware of the fact, so strong was her power of concentration upon the thought uppermost in her mind. She was sitting in a golden-green reflection of afternoon sunshine that glanced from the trees across

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the street and slanted in at the east windows like the dawning of a new day. She was dressed in the softly elusive tints of the earliest spring buds; her hat was wreathed with delicate spring-like flowers, and beneath its drooping brim a few golden-tipped tendrils of chestnut hair fell loose from the knot at the back — the wayward, youthful curls that had come to take the place of the long, queenly braids that had been shorn away last winter. The breeze that sighed through the silence of the room, laden with moist perfume from some freshly sprinkled flower beds near by, came like a breath from the garden of eternal youth. For a moment — one of those moments set apart from all former or latter time — John Fenton's soul was stirred by a delight as sweet as it was inexplicable.

At last Alice looked up.

"So, there is nothing to be done at present," she said, uttering the conclusion of her silent musing. "Since Willow Branch is out of the question, I wish you would look up some other property for me. I think I should like to own real estate — I've never owned a foot of ground in my life."

"Undoubtedly we can find something to suit you," replied Fenton. He gave a little swing to his chair, half toward his desk, as if thereby to bring himself back from that fanciful garden of youth and re-orient himself as the Northwestern landman, aged thirty-nine. "Why not buy unimproved land and hold it for a rise? There's quick profit in that line of investment if you know when and where to buy. For instance,

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take this new town — Hubbell — west of Rothney. The R. L. & I. has four sections around that point. It's a coming proposition — no railroads as yet, but the region will be tapped by the Rainsford cut-off in September, and now is the time to acquire holdings. The soil is a medium Clyde loam, adapted to all the small grains. We'll make the price satisfactory."

"I shall be glad to consider it. And I have other funds, Mr. Fenton — about thirty thousand dollars in all — that I wish you would place for me in any way you think best. I care more for reliable securities than for high rates of interest; I wish my investments to be so perfectly safe that I need not give them a thought. I shall leave everything to your judgment."

"Thank you," said Fenton, simply. After a brief silence he suggested two or three possible disposals of Alice's money, carefully pointing out the pros and cons of each investment. Alice listened attentively, but with the manner of one who, having once delegated responsibility to another, does not intend to give herself much further concern. As general manager of the R. L. & I. during ten full and busy years, John Fenton had dealt with a variety of clients, wise and otherwise — those who knew when to take risks and when to avoid them; skilful manipulators, reckless gamblers, anxious wage-earners, careless stewards of ready-made wealth — but he soon found that Miss Delamere formed a new and very interesting class by herself. He wondered how she had come into possession of her little fortune.

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Probably by a legacy from some one who had been near and dear to her; there was a touch of melancholy, of special tenderness, of gentle reserve, in the way she spoke of the money, as if it were somehow different from ordinary wealth. So, in truth, it had always seemed to Alice, and Fenton's inference, though incorrect, was natural. The writing of "Ardietta" had been a pure labor of love, for which Alice had been paid in full by the joy of the work itself; the checks that had been sent her by her publisher each quarter-day had been received by her as the trustee of Sarah Gray. Now, after transferring to John Fenton's care all that was material in the success of "Ardietta," she felt for the first time that she and Sarah Gray were one.

Fenton would have been willing to prolong the interview indefinitely, but his habits of thought and speech were too business-like for aimless talking; having said all that was necessary, he became silent, and Alice, who had been following him implicitly throughout, reached the end of the discussion at the same instant he did.

"Would n't you like to go out some day and look at that Hubbell land?" he suggested as he walked beside her to the door. "It's a pleasant afternoon drive, and you might enjoy it—provided, that is, you are not timid about horses. I drive a pair of colts that are rather strenuous."

"I am not in the least timid, and I don't doubt I should enjoy the drive," replied Alice, "but it would be quite useless for me to look at the land. I should not know 'Clyde loam' if I saw it."

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“ Well, at least you can see for yourself that it is n’t a sand-hill or a mosquito-bog,” said Fenton. “ I think I must insist upon your going. It ’s against my principles to sell land sight unseen.”

CHAPTER IV

THE PLAINSMAN

JOHAN FENTON'S two or three meetings with Alice Delamere had given him the impression merely of a very pretty, rather fragile-looking, and somewhat reserved young woman who had come to Willow Branch as Mrs. Bowen's guest. Mrs. Bowen supplemented this impression by some account of Alice's early life in Fielding and her subsequent literary career in New York,—nothing was said about "Ardietta," Mrs. Bowen having already pledged herself to silence on this subject,—but not until that day in his office, when for the first time the wonderful blue of Alice's eyes penetrated his deepest consciousness, did Fenton give her sufficient thought to realize that she must be the Miss Delamere whose name he had frequently encountered in the magazines. The identification came with a certain shock and regret.

It was fully three years since he had ceased reading things signed "Alice Delamere," but he distinctly recalled the last article of hers that he had seen. It was one of the satires that she had perpetrated at the expense of frail human nature during the transition period of her disillusion; Fenton had read it protestingly and thrown it aside with the unflattering commentary,

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"That woman has neither heart nor conscience! She would sacrifice the most sacred truths to the display of her own wit!" "That woman" was presumably — yes, undoubtedly — identical with the sedate little creature who had come into his office like a vision of eternal springtime, and had so transformed the prosaic place that he found the effect of her brief presence lingering like an exquisite perfume long after she had gone.

There was little thought of John Fenton in Alice's mind during the days that he thought so often of her. Relieved from immediate anxiety on Mrs. Bowen's account, Alice bestowed undivided attention upon her novel. She found the work increasing in difficulty from day to day, and redoubled her efforts accordingly. She did not suspect that much of this energy was being wasted; the "excess steam" that was lost by her mental machinery in the construction of this made-to-order novel would have been sufficient to run her department in the "Aurora Magazine" for a year.

Clarence presented the chief obstacle to progress. He went through his part like a mechanical doll that is only partially wound up and liable to run down at any minute. He seemed incapable of the simplest human impulses; when made the victim of gross injustice at the hands of another character in the tale he defended himself so listlessly that the point of the situation was lost; when Alice tried to make him jealous by introducing a dangerously attractive secondary hero, Clarence evinced no concern. But for the ready wit and unflagging zeal of the heroine, the story might have

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come to a standstill; Laura kept things moving — aided by the secondary hero — while Clarence stolidly looked on. Alice would have been swift to denounce such a hero had she met him in the pages of another author's book, and she tolerated his presence in her own manuscript only because she could devise no plan for displacing him. Made desperate, one day, by his inertia in a certain scene, she took away the important action that had been assigned him and gave it to the secondary hero. It was a questionable expedient, but if Clarence would n't act some one else *must* fill the gap. The secondary hero grasped the situation at once and carried the scene to a splendid climax. How Alice's jaded spirit revived at this gallant coöperation! — how easy it seemed to write, when the people she wrote about did their share of the work! For the first time she became interested in the story — so interested that she was actually reluctant to lay down her pen when she observed that it was time for her to dress for her drive to Hubbell with Mr. Fenton.

The drive had been arranged the evening before. Fenton had suggested that he might bring his double-seated English trap and take both Miss Delamere and Mrs. Bowen, but Aunt Julia declined to go. "No, Johnny," she said decisively, "you know I never did like fast driving. And that trap of yours sets up so high, and careens so, it makes me dizzy,— it puts me in mind of the time Mr. Bowen made me ride on the camel at the World's Fair in Chicago. My! I guess I'll never forget *that*."

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So when Fenton appeared, punctual to the appointed hour, he was driving his bay colts in his single-seated road-wagon. There was an air of holiday freshness about the elegant little equipage; the sleek colts wore their slim, glistening harness as if it were solely ornamental, and Fenton himself looked like a boy let out of school.

"I hope you were telling the truth when you said you were not timid," he remarked as the road-wagon swept down the cottonwood lane. "This is the first time I have ever asked a woman to ride behind these colts."

"How selfish you have been!"

"You really like it, then?"

"I *love* it!" declared Alice, her eyes sparkling. "I like horses ever so much better than automobiles — don't you?"

"I certainly do, and I'm glad to know that you share the preference. By the way, one of these colts is a Kentucky thoroughbred and the other is a Western broncho. Can you tell which is which?"

She surveyed the perfectly matched pair in silence before replying. "No," she said, in a tone that strongly hinted disbelief.

"Honest, one of them is a 'bronch,'" protested Fenton. "Can't you pick him out?"

"No," said Alice again. "They are exactly alike so far as I can see."

"Hear that, Bob? The lady can't tell you from a thoroughbred." The off-horse flicked an ear at sound of his name, but kept the smooth, rhythmical

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trot that had won first premium for himself and his aristocratic mate when Fenton had driven them last year at the Fair. "It was just a fancy of mine," Fenton went on in a more serious tone. "After I got Romaine I happened to see Bob out on a ranch in Wardner County. His resemblance to my Kentucky horse struck me at once and the more I examined his points the more remarkable the likeness seemed. I bought him, and broke and trained him myself. It was an interesting experiment. You need n't feel badly because you couldn't tell the colts apart; wiser people than you have been deceived. Yes, I much prefer a good horse to any kind of motor-car. I daresay it's because I learned to ride and drive down South, where the best horses grow."

"I thought you came from New England, Mr. Fenton."

"No, I can't claim to be much of a Yankee, though I was born in Vermont. I lived in Illinois as far back as I can remember — until I came here. I have been South more than East." A slight shadow crossed Fenton's face as he spoke. "I think, though, that Nature intended me to be a plainsman. I like free air and lots of space, the open field and the open road. If I had settled down to practise law in Chicago, as I once expected to do, I suppose I should have adapted myself to conditions, as every one does; but at this date nothing would induce me to live in a city of that size."

Alice thoughtfully noted the irreproachable cut of his coat, the correct turn of his collar and hat-brim, the

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smoothness of his shaven cheek and chin, the general ease and fitness of his poise. Just as he was, this well-groomed plainsman might have passed unnoticed in any throng of New York bankers and brokers, so accurately did his appearance conform to the most approved metropolitan mode. "Longitude is an obsolete calculation," she observed. "There is no east and west, in these days."

"That is a singular admission for a New Yorker to make, but it is far truer than you think," said Fenton. "Until recently the West has been looked upon, by the Eastern capitalists who colonized its resources, as a colonial possession having no independence either in latitude or in longitude. But that condition is changing fast, now. We are much less at the beck and call of Wall Street than we used to be. It won't be long before the whole western half of this continent can join Oklahoma in saying that it 'gets nothing from the East but the sunrise.'"

"An important 'but.' Now I understand the legend that adorns all the R. L. & I. stationery, 'Invest your money at home.' Don't you think it is a little inconsistent for you to advise *me*, a New Yorker, to invest my money so far from home?"

"Not at all. It will be a means of education. We will make you a loyal Westerner before we send you back East."

"I might easily be as loyal as some of the people I have met here. I don't believe either Mrs. Stanley or Miss Peck would be greatly sorry to see Rothney erased

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from the map; it's evident that the time they spend at Riverside, each season, is a kind of social martyrdom. And even the people who live here all the year round, and are cheerful and contented, show very little attachment to their fine farms — they treat them like profitable servants, not friends!"

"Well, is n't that more or less true of any country that lacks physiognomy? A prairie has no *locale* — one spot is exactly like another. I suppose you have heard where the people of this country go when they die?"

"No, I have n't the faintest idea what becomes of them. Please tell me."

"The good ones go to Minneapolis. The bad ones — stay where they are."

"I fear you will never be worthy of a future in Minneapolis, if you repeat such slanders of your adopted State. Seriously, you *do* like this country, don't you?"

"Yes," said Fenton, abruptly grave. "To me it is, and always will be, *home*."

The road from Willow Branch to Hubbell was a narrow one for most of the way — a small black thread shot through the shaded green of fields in which the grain showed all stages of growth, barley and rye well advanced in favorable situations, oats and wheat beginning to head out, late-sown flax crusting the ground like moss. Much low land on the borders of sloughs had been abandoned to weedy fallow, and knolls that had been bitten deep by the frosts of May and June now basked idly in the July sunshine. "We did n't

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get a pound of seed into the ground until the fifteenth of May, and even then it was a good deal like putting it in cold storage," said Fenton. "The crops may come out all right, though; they look better than I had expected they could. Sometimes we have a 'bumper' after a backward Spring and late seeding. Have you ever seen wheat-harvest on a large scale? You must let me take you to Riverside some day while Dave Stanley is cutting; this year may be the last chance to see his thirty-five binders working in a single line on his five-mile field."

"Why, what is going to happen next year?"

"I think Dave will be forced to give up his single-crop standard and take to raising a good many other things besides wheat. Time was when Riverside produced thirty or forty bushels to the acre; for the past three or four seasons Dave has thought himself lucky to get twelve, but he has obstinately gone on raising wheat just the same. Have you met Dave yet, Miss Delamere?"

"No. I am still anticipating that pleasure."

"He's a great fellow," said Fenton, smiling. "When I first knew him, out in Wardner County, he could ride, shoot, drink, swear, and play poker faster than any other man on the Missouri Slope. He was a cattle buyer for a packer in Kansas City. I lost sight of him for some time; then he turned up suddenly here in Rothney, with a fortune he had made in a Colorado mine, bought Riverside, and went to farming. Considering the fact that he is a purely theoretical farmer,

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and that he can't be shaken out of a theory once he gets fixed in it, he has had phenomenally good luck. But he has thrown away a lot of money, first and last."

Alice recalled Mrs. Stanley's delicate features, conventional niceties of manner, and habitually discontented expression. "Strange that a woman like Mrs. Stanley should marry a poker-playing cattle buyer!" she said musingly. "How did it happen?"

"Well, I think he had given up the cattle business — and a few other things — before they were married. She might have done worse. Dave is a diamond in the rough, but he is a thoroughly good fellow at heart. He is devoted to his wife — would probably lay down his life for her at a moment's notice."

"It might be easier to lay it down in a moment than to make it over day by day. Many a matrimonial venture has been wrecked by the impossibility of living up to another person's ideal."

The careless tone of Alice's comment reminded Fenton of the magazine writer whose articles he had stopped reading long ago. It was an unwelcome reminder; after looking steadily at the girl for an instant, he turned away with a quick lift of the chin and downward twitch at the corners of his mouth — a characteristic expression which she later learned to interpret as a sign of disapproval and displeasure.

Alice felt no sense of arrival at a destination when Fenton at length informed her that they were on the half section of land which the P. L. & I. offered her at the extremely low price of twenty dollars per acre.

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The country was less level here than at Rothney, but no groves broke its rolling monotony, and except for Hubbell's group of yellow pine buildings in the middle distance, no evidence of human habitation was in sight. Beneath a sky that fitted the horizon like an inverted bowl of transparent blue-and-white porcelain, the prairie spread its vast emptiness, not void like the desert with its shifting sands and demential mirage, but sanely, healthily blank, like the undeveloped mind of a young child. No phantom ships sailed the sea of gray-green primeval sod, no *fata morgana* reared inverted wonder-images against that definite blue sky-line. It was all very real, actual, and vitally elemental; to blaze the trail across such a wilderness might involve hardship, but no mystery. Was it, perhaps, a little too plain? Was Nature just a trifle too obvious?

While Alice dreamily contemplated the prospect, Fenton restrained his colts to a vivacious walk. "Well, Miss Delamere, what is your opinion of this land?" he asked, after several moments had gone by. He regarded her with a remote smile that was half amusement, half pleasure.

She became once more aware of his presence, lifting a pair of eyes that might have borrowed their color from the clear sky above. "My opinion is unchanged, Mr. Fenton," she answered. "I know nothing whatever about 'Clyde loam,' and I am as wise as ever after looking at it."

"But you haven't been looking at it! Your thoughts have been miles away."

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"Oh, no. I have been thinking right here, but I admit that it has n't been to any practical purpose. I warned you that it would be a sheer waste of time for you to bring me here to-day."

"We will charge it up to profit and loss," said Fenton; he released the tightened rein, and once more the road-wagon went bounding over the uneven sod. Neither he nor Alice referred again to the business which had formed the ostensible purpose of their drive together.

He chose a different route homeward, which brought them into Rothney as the long afternoon was mellowing to its golden prime. Though the sun still hung high in the west, the keen blue of the east had softened to a blend of many pastel tints, and even the fence of telegraph poles and wires that bound the northern horizon had lost its hard outline in a gentle haze. "The best part of the day is just beginning," said Fenton. "We will take our next drive at sunset, Miss Delamere."

She smiled at the prediction, but said neither yea nor nay. Unfolding Mrs. Bowen's copy of the *Rothney Weekly Tribune*, which Fenton had taken from the post office as they came through town, she glanced over the first page. "Shall I read you the 'Town Topics,' Mr. Fenton?" she suggested. "I am sure you must be impatient to know who of your neighbors has painted his barn since last week."

"Yes, if you will be so good."

She folded the paper compactly and prepared to read. The wagon was spinning along a narrow road smooth as

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a velvet ribbon — not the shortest road to Willow Branch, though it led there ultimately.

“ ‘ Bert Smith is spending a few days on his claim near Shamrock.’ I ‘hought that when people took up claims, they had to scay on them all the time? Don’t they, really? ‘ General Manager Fenton of the R. L. & I. spent the fore part of the week in Minneapolis.’ That is very interesting, but I suppose it is no news to *you*. ‘ Hon. Edward Kenney was a visitor at Grantham yesterday.’ He is the mayor, is n’t he? It must be fine to be an ‘ Honorable.’ ”

“ It comes cheap enough, at any rate.”

“ What does this mean? ‘ Jim Bayard is mourning the loss of an overshoe, size 8x12, which he is believed to have left in the mud-hole on Main Street at the corner of Second. J. F., where are those paving contracts?’ ”

“ Oh, that means *me*,” said Fenton serenely. “ The council and the mayor have been fighting over the paving contracts for three months. As I am president of the council, and opposed to Kenney, the *Tribune* looks upon me as its lawful prey.”

“ Are n’t you a good Republican? ”

“ Certainly, the best kind of one — called by my friends a progressive and by my enemies an insurgent. The *Tribune* represents the stand-pat faction, and its opposition to me is both political and personal.”

“ Mrs. Bowen thinks it a better paper than that new weekly, the *Advance*. We had a copy of the

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Advance, the other day, and she would hardly condescend to look at it."

"Mrs. Bowen's political convictions were formed in the days of Horace Greeley, and that kind of Republican never changes, no matter what may happen to the party. The *Advance* may seem incendiary to her, but it's a mighty good paper. No, it is not Democratic. There are not enough Democrats in Rothney to color public sentiment; all the fighting is done by stalwarts and progressives, mostly over the liquor question."

"Then prohibition does not prohibit, after all?"

"It is like any other law — it won't work unless it is enforced. So long as prohibition is embodied in the statutes, it should be kept operative. Personally I favor high license; a licensed saloon may be controlled by ordinary legal process, but it's a mere detective job to chase up the liquor traffic of a prohibition town. I don't like the idea of bringing offenders to justice by any system of spotter rewards, yet that has been about the only way to get hold of the fraudulent druggist's permit and the C. O. D. trade."

"Mrs. Bowen says you have done a great deal to reform these abuses."

"I have done something, perhaps. My efforts to secure enforcement of law were fairly successful until the work I did on the railroad commission got some of the stalwart leaders down on me. I'm not through with it, though. I have about decided to be elected

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mayor of Rothney next spring if I have to buy every vote in the place. Something radical has got to be done. At the rate Ed Kenney is running things, Rothney will soon be one of the toughest towns in the State. Hm! This is a coincidence! Here comes the Honorable Edward, now."

A large red touring-car was approaching, its ponderous bulk completely filling the narrow road. While Fenton curbed his excited colts, the driver of the car slowed his machine and backed it slightly into the young green wheat at the side of the way. "Take the road, Fenton — I'll wait," he called, carelessly waving an arm.

"Much obliged," replied Fenton crisply.

Their manner was civil, but by no means cordial. Edward Kenney, seated alone in the big red car, was a man about Fenton's age but appeared much older, with dark hair turning gray at the temples, a hard-shaven mottled cheek, the jaw of a tyrant, the mouth of a sensualist, and a narrow but fearless gaze. He was handsome withal, and he had a look of innate power; he seemed too strong a man to be dominated even by his own strong passions.

He took his black cigar from his lips and held it aside as the road-wagon, passing at a walk, brought Alice so close that he could have touched her with his hand. She had comprehended the mayor of Rothney in a quick, critical glance while he was backing the car, but now her face, pure as a flower and faintly flushed by wind and sun, was half turned away. He gazed

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upon her fixedly for the few seconds that he had, his bold eye lighting with a flash of intense admiration. Alice knew nothing of the look; Fenton saw it, and he was frowning as he completed his circuit of the touring-car and allowed his colts to skim ahead at their former pace.

“The next time you run for mayor, Mr. Fenton,” said Alice, “I’ll vote for you, free of charge.”

He turned to meet her bright, untroubled eyes, his brow clearing. “Thank you, Miss Delamere,” he said with a laugh. “I shall need a lot of votes to beat Ed Kenney. Yours will be particularly acceptable.”

CHAPTER V

AT RIVERSIDE

WHEN visitors came to Riverside it usually devolved upon Miss Isabelle Peck to do the honors of Dave Stanley's model barns and granaries, implement-houses and machine-shops — great buildings painted a uniform dull red and forming a little work-colony half a mile distant from the master's dwelling. Miss Peck performed her hospitable office with the brisk air of a professional guide, stepping firmly in her large but trim Oxford shoes, her flounced summer gown held high above her strong ankles. She detested country life, but she was not without a certain pride in the fine equipment of her brother-in-law's ten-thousand-acre farm, nor was she wholly averse to enlarging upon its points of superiority; she brought Alice Delamere back from a tour of the premises duly impressed by the magnificent scale upon which "Dave" conducted his business.

"Oh, yes, it may be interesting — just to look at," admitted Miss Peck as the two ladies turned their steps toward the house. "You would soon tire of it, Miss Delamere, if you had to stay here as *I* do. I often tell my niece that she would be much less enthusiastic about her visits at Riverside if she had to come and

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could n't help herself. My niece, Madeline Allingham; my sister Anna's child. We expect to have her with us next winter in Minneapolis. She has been abroad the past year with Mr. Allingham's sister, Mrs. Harriet Van Alstyne; now Maisie and I will have our turn."

Miss Peck smiled sweetly, but her keen eyes snapped. There had always been lively competition between Madeline's paternal and maternal relatives for possession of "Loudon's daughter" and "Anna's child," as the girl was designated by the two respective factions. The trip abroad had scored a point for the Allinghams, and Madeline's impending *début* might have given the game into their hands if Madeline herself had not elected to enter society in her native city, under Mrs. Stanley's timid guidance, rather than in New York under the skilled generalship of Mrs. Van Alstyne. It is just possible that Madeline, who was a remarkably far-sighted young person, regarded the Minneapolis *début* as a dress-rehearsal for the New York drama that was to follow, but be this as it may, her decision showed tact. She recognized the propriety of giving Aunt Maisie and Aunt Belle their "turn."

Still talking of Madeline, Miss Peck and Alice rejoined Mrs. Stanley and Mrs. Bowen on the porch, where tea was presently served. Mrs. Stanley served tea on the porch every afternoon; the ceremony was never allowed to lapse even when its sole participants were Sister Belle and herself. "Though we live in a wilderness, we need not live like savages," she nobly declared. Undoubtedly the presence of others added

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zest to the civilizing function; this afternoon Mrs. Stanley presided over her tea-table with far more vivacity than she could have mustered for the entertainment of Miss Peck alone.

The porch at Riverside, as originally designed, had been typical of the "wilderness" to which Mrs. Stanley so feelingly referred — bright, bare, meagrely furnished, with the wind whistling sharply through the shiny copper-wire screens,—and as such Dave had found it highly satisfactory. Mrs. Stanley had super-added rugs, couches, tables, hanging lamps, potted palms, Japanese shades, and shirred white muslin curtains, while Dave looked on in cumulative amazement. "By George!" he exclaimed at last, perplexedly stroking his head upward from the back of his neck. "Maisie, I don't see where your *out-doors* is comin' in. You might as well have the place boarded up and be done with it." His objection went no further than this, however; he knew that many things which to him seemed non-essential were especially dear to Maisie's heart, and he tolerated them for her sake, like the devoted husband that he was.

The dry breeze stirred the muslin curtains in fitful puffs laden with the fragrance of fresh loam from a hay-field beyond the carriage drive, where a five-gang plough drew long black furrows through the brown stubble. In a small patch of shade dropped by one of the young elms on the lawn, sat the heir of Riverside, aged five, surrounded by playthings and attended by a neat nursery-maid who kept one eye on the willow

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wicker chariot in which little Isabelle, aged two, was taking her afternoon nap under the tilt of a snowy ruffled parasol. Beyond the lawn and the hay-field stretched miles of ripening wheat, unbroken to the skyline. When Alice arrived in Rothney the wheat had covered the plain like a pale green velvet carpet; in a week's time the carpet had been transformed into the semblance of a rippling lake; now, the grain yielded to the west wind in long, gray waves. Above, on a calm sea of blue sky, a single tiny cloud made prosperous voyage southward, borne by some serene upper current infinitely removed from the west wind's fitful humor.

Alice drew open the top of her silk work-bag and took out the trifle of embroidery that she had brought with her, but sat idle, her gaze dreamily following the south-bound cloud. If the truth were told, she had come back from her inspection of the Riverside buildings as weary as any Cook's tourist. Miss Peck, none the worse for the energetic jaunt, fell upon her Battenberg centrepiece with undiminished zeal; Mrs. Stanley crocheted gently at a pink umbrella shawl; Mrs. Bowen knitted a black silk mitten, her needles darting like flashes of lightning, her spectacles set slightly askew upon her short nose. Centrepiece and mitten progressed steadily as the talk went on, but Mrs. Stanley's crochet hook halted at each emphatic turn of the conversation, while at the stronger rhetorical climaxes the lady dropped the pink fluff of wool in her lap and folded her hands upon it, her fingers lying straight, seemingly too short to curve, and heavily weighted with dull rose-

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cut diamonds in old-fashioned settings — her grandmother's jewels, which she wore with special pride in their oddity.

"There comes Dave," announced Miss Peck, directing her sharp gaze down the drive. "Seems to me he's had that colt out longer than usual to-day. He's breaking a colt to harness," she added to Miss Delamere.

"It's always such relief when he gets back safe and sound," sighed Mrs. Stanley, shaking out the shawl and drawing up a stitch or two. "I do wish he would send the horses to a trainer, but he insists on breaking them himself; he thinks no one else can do it so well as he can."

"It's dangerous work," said Mrs. Bowen.

Mr. Stanley turned off toward the stable while still some distance from the house. Alice gained but a brief glimpse of a tall, foam-flecked bay colt with reddened eyes glaring above the padded pulling-band, and a short, thick-set man braced firmly in the slight frame of a breaking-cart. The man's complexion, naturally fair but deeply tanned, showed a dark flush of exertion; his short arms were rigid as iron, his stout hands gripped the tight reins vise-like. "Brute force versus brute force," thought Alice, as man and horse whisked out of sight beyond the corner of the house. She was hardly prepared for the change in Dave's aspect when he emerged from the house twenty minutes later. He always dressed for the part he had to play, and the rapidity with which he changed costume would have been

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a valuable asset to an actor; while breaking horses he looked the rough turfman to the life; in the harvest field he assumed the garb of the men about him; now, for his afternoon leisure, he wore a suit of immaculate white flannels and a blue silk negligee shirt. His heated color had been reduced to its norm by a plunge and a shower; he looked cool and fresh and amiable.

"How-de-do, everybody?" he called cheerily. "How are you, Mrs. Bowen? Miss Delamere — pleased to make your acquaintance. Plenty of room, Maisie — here's a chair, 'round by Sister Belle, that's just my size." He dropped into a willow rocking-chair and extended his small, neatly shod feet, yawning frankly. "Heigh-ho-hum! I'm tired."

"Did the colt pull pretty hard?" inquired Miss Peck.

"Like the very Old Nick!" Mr. Stanley carefully manipulated his aching biceps. "He thought he was goin' to wear me to a frazzle, but he found out different."

"You are late for tea, Dave, so I shan't let you have any," said Mrs. Stanley, smiling at the sly humor of her own speech — Dave's contempt for afternoon tea knew no bounds. "I told Ida to have a lemonade ready for you. Will you take it with Apollinaris, or without?"

"M — m — I dunno. You might have her mix it half-and-half — with a squeeze of orange-juice. And tell her to be sure to put in plenty of shaved ice and a couple of straws." As Mrs. Stanley turned, with a gesture of graceful acquiescence, to summon the maid,

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Dave concentrated his attention upon Miss Delamere, whom he regarded with a squint of friendly interest. "I believe you're the young lady," he observed, "that's done me out of buyin' the southeast and northeast quarters of section four, range two, Eckley township."

Everybody looked astonished except Alice, in whose mind the legal description of her recent Hubbell purchase was fairly distinct. "I am very sorry that I interfered with your plans, Mr. Stanley," she said, smiling. "You see, I didn't know you wished to buy the land."

"Oh, it's all right," he replied magnanimously. "I hadn't no option on it. A couple of weeks back I thought I might buy it, and then it went clean out of my head. Yesterday I stopped at the R. L. & I. office and says, 'John, I guess I'll take them southeast and northeast quarters in section four.' And John says, 'You're too late. The land's sold.' Well, I reckon I can pick up another piece that'll suit me equally as well."

"Nonsense, Dave!" laughed Miss Peck. "You don't want any more land."

"What's the reason I don't?" he retorted with burlesque fierceness. "Guess I know what I want." Then he continued, once more addressing his wife, "Thought Loudon B. was comin' up to the house this afternoon. He's still in town."

"Yes. John telephoned just after you had gone out with the horse. He said that he and Loudon were

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starting for Ravenna, and would stop here on their way back."

"Ought to show up pretty soon, then. Hm — here comes the drinkables! Remembered the two straws, did n't you, Ida? Good girl! Any of you ladies want some of this stuff before I let into it? All right, then; here goes."

Dave stirred an extra portion of sugar into the lemonade and drank the sparkling liquid deliberately through the two straws. His epicurean relish of meat and drink was an art acquired in his later life of ease, an art unknown in the old days when, as salaried travelling agent, he had snatched his food wherever he could get it with the least loss of time. As he pushed aside the empty glass he looked down the shimmering line of sun-baked road and remarked, "That's Loudon and John comin' now." He drew up his extended feet, shrugged down his coat collar, and getting himself out of his comfortable chair by degrees, descended the porch steps as Fenton's runabout stopped. Fenton swept off his hat with a bow to the group on the porch, his expression lighting as his eye fell upon Alice Delamere.

"Hello, hello!" nodded Dave. "Walk in, Loudon, and make yourself at home. Say, John, your horse looks pretty warm. You'd better put him in the stall till he cools off. I'll ride down to the barn with you." He briefly shook Mr. Allingham's hand, then jumped into the runabout and drove off with Fenton.

Mr. Allingham entered the porch, ceremoniously

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bowing to the ladies. His salutation was returned in kind, except by Miss Peck, whose greeting seemed little more gracious than Dave's had been. There had never been much love lost between Isabelle Peck and her deceased sister's husband. Twenty years ago, when Loudon B. Allingham married plain-featured, honest-minded Anna Peck, everybody but Anna knew that he had married her for her money; within a year Anna knew it too, and after she died all the world knew that she had known. She had left the bulk of her large fortune to her baby daughter, in the care of two trustees neither of whom was Mr. Allingham; to her husband she had bequeathed an income certainly sufficient to maintain any mourning widower with simple tastes, but by no means adequate to the ambitious plans of a daring stock-gambler like Loudon Allingham. The bereaved fortune-hunter concealed his feelings admirably, acceding to the terms of his wife's will and wisely biding his time. On the death of one of Madeline's trustees a few years later, he secured his own appointment to the vacant position, gained control of the property, and proceeded to use it exactly as he had intended to use it when he married Anna — made it the foundation for his own fortune-building. The fact that he had built a splendid superstructure, trebling Madeline's inheritance and raising himself to the rank of multimillionaire, afforded little consolation to Isabelle Peck, who thought only of how cruelly he had cheated poor Anna out of the sacred right to be wooed and won for her own sake. Yet for the sake of Anna's child, matters had long since

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been smoothed over — Madeline being dearer to Aunt Belle than anything else on earth.

Mr. Allingham seated himself beside Mrs. Stanley, and taking off his gold pince-nez he polished it caressingly in the depths of a handkerchief exquisitely fine. He was a tall, slender man, of a colorless blond type, about fifty years old. His narrow face, shaven smooth except for a close white mustache, was mapped with shallow wrinkles that might be interpreted either as lines of thought or as footprints of time, but were really neither, being caused solely by the shrinkage of an exceptionally delicate skin. His features were handsome, except the eyes, which were small, pink-lidded and readily suffused,— eyes that had already cost their owner a fabulous sum, since only by the skill of a world-famous oculist had their sight been preserved until now.

Mounting the polished pince-nez upon the taper forefinger of a slim, well-formed hand, Mr. Allingham rested his elbow on the arm of his chair and inclined his head a little to one side with an ingratiating air as he talked. It was his favorite pose — the pose of photographs and newspaper cuts, and even of newspaper cartoons, though in the hands of the cartoonist Mr. Allingham always appeared sanctimonious. His policy of deprecating evil in high places and compromising contention between the weak and the strong had earned for him, from his political opponents, the sobriquet of “Holy Harmonizer.” His friends knew him as a courteous, affable gentleman, and very good company.

“No, Daughter found it impossible to come with me

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this time," he was saying in response to Mrs. Stanley's inquiry. When he referred to Madeline or addressed her as "Daughter" he used the title impressively, as if he felt that by bringing this radiant young creature into the world he had conferred lasting distinction upon the relation of parent to child. "She hopes to run up next week to consult with you and Aunt Belle about this little house party of hers."

"I hope she is not planning for a *little* party, Loudon," protested Mrs. Stanley. "We are so dull here, Belle and I, that a crowd of lively young people will be a perfect godsend to us."

"It is very kind of you to take so deep an interest in my dear, motherless child," said Mr. Allingham. He then turned his blandly blinking gaze upon Alice Delamere. "Is this your first visit to Rothney, Miss Delamere?" he inquired.

When Dave Stanley and John Fenton returned, Mr. Allingham was recounting, for Alice's benefit, his own experience as passenger on a stalled train during the snow blockade of the previous Winter. Fenton seated himself at the end of a cushioned couch near Miss Delamere's chair; Dave resumed his willow rocker, and for a wonder he permitted Mr. Allingham to finish his tale without interruption — usually he was impatient of other men's story-telling. Mr. Allingham told his story well, emphasizing its picturesque features — the long coast train lying like a frozen serpent with its head in the drift, the gray sky shedding its inexhaustible smother of fleecy flakes, the brief sallies of scouts

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who set forth to find the farmhouse that was said to lie somewhere off to the right, and the finally successful effort of a telegraph operator to climb an icy pole and use his key to send a signal of distress along the snow-burdened wire. He became eloquent in describing the arrival of the relief train convoyed by the rotary plough; this part of the narrative showed the Railroad as he was most fond of depicting it — as the beneficent genius of civilization, the all-powerful friend of man.

Dave broke the silence that followed Mr. Allingham's well-rounded final sentence. "Yes," he said, "there was terrible sufferin' on some of them Great Northern sleepers last winter. Why, I heard of one traffic-manager whose private car got balled up in one of them drifts, who had to sleep in his overcoat two nights and drink his coffee without cream for two mornin's."

Mrs. Stanley and Miss Peck exchanged glances. Alice lifted a puzzled look to Fenton's face, which seemed quite grave except that the eyes showed a twinkle of his remote smile.

"But how about them people that froze to death on their homesteads in Wardner and Byrne Counties?" broke forth Dave in a different tone. "How about them two women that starved in their shack in Walling County? *There's* somethin' worth talkin' about! That's the kind of cases that ought to 've got relief from the railroads. If we'd had coal and provisions, we could have weathered the blizzards all right. And why did n't we have 'em? Because the railroad did n't haul 'em — that's why."

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"If I am correctly informed," said Mr. Allingham, calmly, "the exceptional cases to which you refer lay beyond the reach of any railroads."

"Well, look at Park Valley, Ravenna, Luverne!" pursued Dave. "I bet you could pick out twenty towns on the main line that waited until after the middle of February for fuel and stuff that was ordered before the first of the year. The railroads held up traffic until navigation closed so they could grab their long haul. Guess any fool knows that much."

"Perhaps; but some wise men may know better," retorted Mr. Allingham. Repartee was a weapon rarely employed by him, and after making this single thrust with it he gently laid it down. "The fuel shortage was caused by the neglect of local dealers to put in their supplies before the crop began to move in the Fall," he went on in the tone of one instructing an ignorant child. "The carrying capacity of the roads was taxed to the limit; freight moved as rapidly as could be expected under the adverse weather conditions that prevailed."

"The car-shortage began 'way back last Summer," said Dave. "There was more wheat lost last season by rottin' on the ground and bein' et by jack-rabbits than has been lost by rust or drouth in five years. Why, I could n't begin to get the cars I needed to haul my wheat! It did n't break me, because I've got big bins of m' own, but the small farmers could n't do nothin' but let the grain lay on the ground and rot. There wa' n't any 'adverse weather' until long after

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Christmas. There was weeks and weeks of fine weather that not a pound of coal moved our way from the head of the Lakes. Then when the blizzards come, a lot of people got caught without any fuel — not because they had n't the money to pay for it, neither! There was folks all but froze to death within twenty miles of Rothney. Take that family of Dutch sherrises north of Hubbell, and them two school-marms a mile further on — guess the whole bunch would be playin' on golden harps now if it had n't 've been for John Fenton here; he got a-hold of some cord-wood and half-a-ton of coal — Lord knows how — and got it bob-sledged out to them folks when it was thirty-six below zero."

"Ah, indeed," said Mr. Allingham politely.

Alice glanced once more at Fenton. He flushed a little under the gaze of her serious blue eyes, with the first show of diffidence that she had yet seen in him.

"Miss Delamere, you must not let us frighten you with these grewsome tales," he said in a quiet tone meant for her ear alone. "Last Winter was exceptional, you know. We may not see its like for twenty years to come."

"We all admit that transportation facilities are far from adequate," said Mr. Allingham, his smooth tone flowing in like oil after the rush of Dave's impetuous speech. "Who should know this better than the railway officials themselves, who are working day and night to meet an overwhelming demand? No railroad could possibly keep pace with the growth and development of the Northwest. We are all one family,— producers,

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consumers, dealers, carriers, and we must bear and forbear. Whatever maladjustment there may be in the balance of our several interests, we *must* work in harmony to get results. Undoubtedly much will be accomplished by legislation; indeed, much has already been accomplished, and the work has gone forward none the less surely because it has sometimes gone slowly. It is advisedly slow. I cannot at the moment recall any instance of hasty legislation that has accomplished the end desired."

"I guess some of our legislators will be a little spryer in the future than they have been in the past — they'll have to be or they'll lose their jobs," opined Dave, dryly. "When this State rounds up her independent vote at the primaries next June, you'll see that we're about through sendin' railroad errand-boys and corporation-jackals to Congress. If that Punch-and-Judy show down at Washington thinks that us Northwestern farmers is a lot of woolly hoboes with nothin' but the votes in our hands, they're goin' to learn a few before they're many months older! We've got the hard cash to buy everything on earth that we don't raise ourselves. We've got wheat enough to run every blame flour-mill in this land of the Boss and home of the Trust. What we want is *cars* — and we'll get 'em, don't you worry! We'll send men to Washington that ain't gagged and handcuffed by 'pledges' before they leave home. Mebbe we'll send Fenton, here. He's a fellow who always gets to any place he starts for, and he don't travel on passes, neither."

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Mr. Allingham, idly tapping his eye-glasses upon the arm of his chair, made no reply. Possibly Dave realized that in his reference to Fenton he had gone too far, or possibly he was content with the fact of having the last word; at all events he abruptly changed the subject, and allowed the conversation to drift into more peaceful channels.

"Is it true that your congressmen are railroad errand-boys and corporation-jackals?" asked Alice of Fenton.

"Oh, not quite. You must take Dave's political opinions with some allowance. He's a rabid insurgent. Our representatives have been very much like those sent from every other State in the Union. We may have had rather more than our share of railroad domination, but I doubt it. Conditions are much the same the country over."

"Are you going to Congress, Mr. Fenton?"

He smiled. "Not this year. Probably not so long as Colonel Nicholas Hartshorne is running things."

"How long will that be?"

"I can't tell you, Miss Delamere. The Colonel himself thinks he has a life job as boss — some of the rest of us differ with him. We are going to try it out next election — we have a new direct primary law going into effect which may bring a change in methods even if it does n't materially alter results."

"That is the law providing for the election of senators by popular vote?"

"That is what it is supposed to do. In its present

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form it is defective and it will have to be amended before it is of much practical value. For this reason, among others, I prefer to keep out of the race for the present. I don't care to waste time and money on an experimental campaign."

Alice looked at Fenton thoughtfully. She had sometimes wondered why a man of his commanding personality and mature years should be still bound by the limitations of a town like Rothney, cherishing no ambition higher than to be mayor of the town. She now perceived the possibility of a far-reaching, unhurried purpose beneath his apparent indifference — a sequential progress that made sure footing on each round of the ladder, a record of indelible impressions left upon the public mind at each stage of his public service.

"When you do go to Washington, will you make war on trusts and monopolies, as Mr. Stanley intimated that you might?"

"Certainly. I may not go about it exactly as he would. I am not in sympathy with the anti-everything spirit that is running wild of late. There is truth in what Mr. Allingham says about hasty legislation; wherever it is possible to go slow I think it is better to do so, though the measures I brought before the legislature, while I was railroad commissioner, were thought madly revolutionary at the time."

"State politics must furnish a very interesting drama, when one knows what it is all about; it's so much more intimate and — and *human* than national issues."

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"We are likely to have continuous vaudeville in this State for the next few months; it may be a three-ringed circus before we get our primary candidates sifted out. If it interests you, I'll see that you get the *Advance* every week. Ah, thanks, Dave — if Miss Delamere does n't mind." Fenton paused to accept a cigar from the box Dave held out to him, deferentially referring the act to Alice.

"Oh, she won't mind," said Dave, answering for her. "These cigars are A number one, if I do say it." He proffered a light to Mr. Allingham and Fenton, observing to the former as he resumed his rocking-chair, "Wonder who's comin' to Madeline's house party this year? Same as last Summer?" Mr. Allingham reflected a moment, and mentioned a few names. "Why, it's a reg'lar kid crowd! Some of 'em ain't through high school yet. Well, that's just like Madeline. When she was a little tot and gave tea parties she used to invite all the babies — and you bet she made 'em stand 'round, too! I guess she likes to be the boss." He smiled, as if he rather admired his niece's dominant disposition.

"I scarcely think that is Daughter's idea," said the father, his dry face creasing into the diagram of a smile. He, too, admired Madeline. "She probably feels that she can give more pleasure to this younger set, which has fewer social diversions; besides, being not yet formally introduced to society herself, she is as much a child as any of them."

"Sure — Madeline's all right!" said Dave,

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cordially. "Finest girl in the world. 'Ain't that so, John?" He raised his voice to project it in Fenton's direction, with a side glance of cunning intelligence at Mr. Allingham, whose feeble eye made no response.

"No one will dispute that, Dave," said Fenton.

"And so," Dave pursued, "Algy Sutherland is comin' up to help Madeline boss the high-school bunch. Guess he can do it if anybody can. Algy's a nice fellow—and a mighty good-lookin' fellow, too, eh, John?"

"That is a matter of taste." Fenton spoke nonchalantly, but Alice fancied that his tone concealed a trace of annoyance; evidently Dave's raillery was not at all to his liking.

"Can't expect *you* to get very enthusiastic over his beauty, I reckon. Well, that's natural enough. Oh, land, yes," Dave added in reply to a casual question from Mr. Allingham. "John and I knew Algy Sutherland 'way back in the '90's. He was a pattern little English dudelet, a dear little Mammy's lamb, when he first got lost on the range. Could n't 've been more'n sixteen years old—was he, John? He'd had some kind of a row with his dad, and his mamma furnished him the cash to stay here in the States until the unpleasantness blew over. He never went back, though; believe his mother died and his dad married again. Algy wa'n't nothin' but a 'younger son,' anyhow. We all liked him, though the boys never quit guyin' him about his clothes and his pronunciation and his ridin'—he sure *was* a holy show on horseback. John

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taught him to ride pretty decent after a while. You could n't make him mad, no matter what you did to him; he charged it all up to us bein' Americans. He thought Americans was 'curious persons'—how was it he used to say it?—'cu'ius pairsons.' He was a great kid. It's improved him quite a bit to live in Minneapolis all these years; he's got most of the English rubbed off the outside, though I guess he's still a Johnny Bull at heart. Ever hear the story about Algy and the rustlers?"

"No, I do not recall it."

"Never heard that yarn? Oh, pshaw, it's a good 'un."

Dave chuckled at the mere mention of the "yarn"; Mr. Allingham, mellowing under the influence of his fine cigar, suggested affably, "Let us have it, Dave."

Nothing loath, Dave settled himself in his chair and began the narrative. Fenton shifted his position so that the light breeze carried the smoke of his Havana away from Alice, and leaning against a bank of silken cushions he looked at the girl through the fragrant blue haze while Dave told his famous story about Algy and the rustlers. Everybody listened, even Miss Peck and Mrs. Bowen suspending their quiet chat over the work being planned by the Ladies' Missionary Society. It is not too much to say that Mrs. Stanley hung upon her husband's every word—and that it was like hanging over a precipice. Strange as it may seem she had never heard the story before. It had two versions, original and revised, the latter being used when ladies

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were present; while regretting the necessity of elimination Dave did full justice to the remaining points, so that Mrs. Stanley's tremor of apprehension was not wholly unreasonable. The tale abounded in humor yet had its moments of daring, danger, and life-and-death suspense; John Fenton figured in it as a reckless, adventurous youth, wearing the chaps and pistol-belt and sombrero of the typical ranchman — a past individuality which Alice Delamere found rather difficult to reconcile with the well-seasoned, steady-eyed man who now smiled at her, as from a great distance, through the haze of his cigar. Fenton derived far more entertainment from Alice's flashes of amusement and her shocked little glances at himself, than he could possibly have drawn from Dave's retrospect alone, though he joined heartily in the general mirth at his own expense and Algy's. Mr. Allingham laughed as he rarely laughed at anything; Miss Peck pursed her lips in good-natured contempt for the whole recital, murmuring, "For pity's sake!" Mrs. Bowen wiped reactionary tears of laughter from her eyes as she remarked to Fenton, "Well, Johnny, I'd never 've thought that of *you*!" Mrs. Stanley smiled faintly, in evident relief, while Dave, conscious that he had made a decided hit, expanded into a vast geniality — he could be the most genial of men when he chose.

"Aw, where's your hurry!" he roared in a fine rage of hospitality, when at length Mrs. Bowen, winding up her knitting, gave the signal for a general stir of departure. "You'll stay and have dinner with us —

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and Loudon and John, too. I say, Maisie, can't you rustle up that kitchen-canary of ours and have dinner early? I'm hungry enough to eat a drowned rat."

Mrs. Stanley seconded the invitation, her conventional phrases and sweet voice contrasting almost pathetically with Dave's words and tone; but Mrs. Bowen gently excused herself and Alice, and as Mr. Allingham and John Fenton were obliged to meet an engagement with the Honorable Edward Kenney at the hotel, Fenton's runabout and Mrs. Bowen's phaeton were brought up from the stable at the same time.

Fenton handed Alice into the phaeton. "Will you go driving with me to-morrow evening at sunset?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered.

He thanked her, and springing into his runabout, took the reins from Mr. Allingham's provisional grasp. Dave stood at the steps, his hands in his pockets. "So long, everybody!" he sang out as the vehicles moved down the drive. "The next time you come, though, you'll stay to dinner or there'll be trouble!"

CHAPTER VI

WHILE THE SUN GOES DOWN

IT came to pass that John Fenton took Alice Delamere driving nearly every evening. Mrs. Bowen sat on the veranda and watched them drive away, meditating upon the possibility that inevitably presents itself to any thinking mind when an eligible man and an attractive woman manifest a preference for each other's society; and while not inclined to think too seriously of such a situation she could not fail to perceive that to John, at least, this new friendship really meant something. Of Alice's sentiments she felt much less sure. "Well, anyways, there's no need for me to interfere," she thought. "If Alice don't care for Johnny, nothing that I could say to her would make any difference; and I guess he can look out for himself without any help from *me*." She attached little importance to John's long-standing declaration that he should never marry, and still less to a similar statement recently made by Alice; Alice was too young to say such a thing convincingly, while to John belonged the man's prerogative of changing his mind at the eleventh hour.

Mrs. Bowen would have gained little enlightenment from the talk that went on during those sunset drives.

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John and Alice differed oftener than they agreed in matters of personal opinion, yet they were singularly alike in their balanced frankness and reserve; each could be sure of the other's sympathy up to a certain point, and beyond that point each could trust the other not to trespass. Their acquaintance progressed rather slowly, considering the number of hours they spent together each day. Fenton's character was an equilibrium of opposite traits which at first glance seemed to neutralize each other; thus to know him slightly was to know him not at all, and to know him well was a gradual surprise. Men who saw him only as the keen, strict, successful investment broker, often went far in association with him before they discovered that he was sensitive, or blundered tardily upon the fact that he had a fiery temper. Lovely women whose charm had failed to ensnare him denounced him as cold, little suspecting that but for the nice adjustment between his strength of passion and his power of self-mastery, John Fenton would have been the most helpless lion that ever rolled in beauty's net.

Fenton still found himself baffled sometimes by the apparent contradiction between the Alice Delamere who had come into his life this Summer and the magazine writer whose essays he had ceased to read. "One of these phases must be real, and the other a sham," he thought. "The question is, which is which?" Once, he sought an answer to the question by frankly taking Alice to task for the article that had so especially displeased him.

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"I disliked it so much," he confessed, "that I have never read a word of yours from that day to this."

"What a pity!" said Alice, demurely. "You have missed some of my best work."

"I daresay — I certainly hope I have!" he retorted. "I should be sorry to think that *this* rubbish was your 'best work.'" He slipped both rein-straps to his right hand, and taking a folded slip of paper from his pocket he gave it to Alice. It was a leaf from the "Aurora Magazine," a fragment of the paper under discussion. Alice glanced down the columns, mentally reconstructing a half-forgotten whole from the sentences before her. The color deepened in her cheek as she read; she felt a strong desire to disown the outgrown cynicism of these empty-sounding lines, but Fenton's tone had put her upon her own defence. One does not tamely submit to being told that one's work is "rubbish," no matter how true the criticism may be.

"I am sorry that you found it so objectionable," she said, in accents much too meek to be genuine. "But you must not blame me, Mr. Fenton. I had no chance to consult your judgment as to how I should write — I was n't even blessed with the knowledge of your existence. How *could* I please you?"

"My judgment is the judgment of a friend. Any one who had your interests at heart would say the same thing. Such writing was unworthy of you, Miss Delamere." He took back the leaf from the "Aurora," tore it twice across, and let the fragments loose upon the wind that rushed past. His brusqueness deserved

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rebuke, yet Alice's impulse was to thank him; never before had any voice except that of her own literary conscience told her that the work of the disillusion period was unworthy. She longed to cry out, "I know it — I know it! I have repented of my folly — I am wiser now," but she felt that Fenton could not be expected to understand such an admission. She sat silent beside him.

They were driving homeward more rapidly than usual, to escape an imminent thunder-shower. After several moments of silence, Fenton stopped the horses, tossed the reins to Alice, and sprang out. Her gaze followed him in wonder until she saw that he was cutting a spray from a wild-rose bush at the side of the road. Without a word he dropped the roses into her lap and drove on. Her cheek dimpled involuntarily as she looked down at his peace-offering; not more than once in a summer would seven perfect blossoms, all newly opened and deeply carmine, be found upon a single little branch, and only by the rarest chance had Fenton descried their warm gleam through the dusk of the gathering storm. She looked up at last, her eyes dancing mischievously.

"Am I to be forgiven?" he demanded in his crisp, business-like way.

"Possibly — for the gift's sake; not for your own."

Usually, however, their discussions were amicable, and not often was the personal note sounded. They exchanged views on nearly every debatable topic. Their talk of painting and sculpture disclosed the fact

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that the Western plainsman had studied at his leisure many masterpieces of old-world art that Alice had merely glimpsed in her one hurried trip abroad. He had heard much music and while avowing ignorance of technique he had positive ideas about what he liked and did not like, and stated without shame that the "worst evening he ever put in" was at a performance of Wagner's "Tristan and Isolde."

"The trouble with most modern music," he said, "and for that matter, with all forms of latter-day art, is that too much emphasis is placed upon the discords and not enough upon the harmonies. There is plenty of dissonance in the world, but Lord help us! we don't need to keep harping on it all the time. Fiction is filled with the discords of human life; the drama gives us practically nothing else."

From fiction and fiction writers in general Alice led the talk to a certain woman whose latest novel had called forth much heated controversy among the critics. To draw the fire of Fenton's criticism she defended the book, though in reality she liked it no better than he did.

"I question whether a novel should ever be written on such a theme," he said in conclusion. "It certainly should not be written by a woman. These women novelists are forever rushing in where the average man would fear to tread. They try to be virile in style, and not one of them can do it; they always fail lamentably in the attempt to write like a man or to borrow a man's point of view. Even when a woman takes a

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masculine pseudonym — perhaps she is ashamed to sign her own name; it would n't be strange if she were — nobody is deceived by it. Her hero will give her away if nothing else does; he's bound to be one of two things, an impudent bully or an impossible paragon."

"Mr. Fenton, why are you not a professional reviewer? It seems too bad for such talents to be wasted on amateur performance."

"Oh, I'm nothing but a 'gentle reader'!" laughed Fenton.

"I hardly dare ask what you think of 'Ardietta,' by Sarah Gray."

"I can say with pride that I have n't read it. Yes, I am the only real and living 'human wonder' who has not read that confounded thing. Some time ago I quit bothering with these much-advertised 'best sellers' — they are nearly always a fake. I suppose you know 'Ardietta,' Miss Delamere — is it a fake, as I strongly suspect?"

"No," said Alice, quietly. "Whatever may be its faults, it is at least sincere. The future will show whether Miss Gray is capable of writing another novel equal to her first. I have a copy of 'Ardietta,' Mr. Fenton, which I will gladly lend you."

"Heaven forbid! — That is, I mean that I'm much obliged for your kind offer, but I really can't spare time to read the book. There are too many pleasanter ways of spending time."

A silence fell between them — one of the long, companionable silences that were becoming rather frequent

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of late. They were driving later than usual that evening, to watch an exceptional sunset to its close, and with the prairie dweller's disregard of conventional boundaries, Fenton drove across new-mown hay-fields in preference to following the angles of indifferently graded roads. There was little breeze, and the air hung heavy with the perfume of withered clover; upon the blue plain of the sky were scattered motionless flocks of white clouds tinged with rosy high-lights and amethyst shadows that deepened to crimson and purple as the climax of refraction grew, until not a trace of pure white remained; the west was a fiery furnace, the east a spreading flame, and even the thin filaments cast here and there in the depths of farthest space flushed faintly pink. Within the past hour John Fenton had questioned the dramatic power of Tristan, taken issue with Bernard Shaw, and freely criticised the color values of La Farge, but he offered not a word of comment upon the sunset. He looked steadily upon the spectacle, with a certain deepening of his expression; he drove very slowly, and once he stopped the horses for a full minute, while the noiseless pageant of color swept on, from west to east, across the zenith. Alice's silence united with his own to perfect a harmony of thought and sense that a single word might have marred. They had driven on again, for some distance, before she spoke.

"Mr. Fenton, I am thinking of what you said just now about the woman novelist and her hero — poor things! I don't in the least subscribe to what you

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said, but I always try to keep an open mind for new light on these subjects. Please give me your definition of a *real* hero."

"A hero in real life, you mean?"

"Yes — or one in a novel. Should n't one definition cover both?"

He shook his head. "Not likely to fit both cases," he said. "In a novel, some one man is the hero because — well, because it's his job. The author puts him in the centre and groups others about him in subordinate relations. Take these same people, put them in real life, subject them to the test of actual experience, and they might all be equally heroic. Look at any account of a shipwreck, a mine-disaster, or a railroad smash-up, and see how every one rises to the occasion. We are not a race of cowards in this twentieth century, whatever else we may be. I think I should define a hero as a man — *any* man — whose courage is always equal to his need. If you want an example, take the young fellow who lives in that shack yonder. He will probably never be brought into the limelight, but in his way he is as genuine a hero as I have ever known."

Alice's glance followed Fenton's toward a group of small brown buildings which formed the nucleus of Jefferson Hayward's farm. She had called at the farm several times with Mrs. Bowen, and had often talked with Jeff and his young wife. She knew that John Fenton had borne an important part in their experiences, but this was the first time that Fenton himself had referred to the young couple. Alice was

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studying John Fenton's character, from day to day, more closely than she realized — perhaps through a subconscious habit of observing human nature. It now occurred to her that it might be interesting to see how he would appear in his own account of circumstances already well known to her from other sources. "Please tell me Mr. Hayward's story," she said.

"There's not much to tell; Jeff's pluck is the whole thing. A soldier could get along with half his courage. He knows that he is dying of an incurable malady; he wakes to the fact each morning and does his work in the face of it. He has a great love of life, and everything to live for, yet he keeps a brave front at the steady approach of death. There is nothing spectacular about it. He gets no applause to cheer him on, because few of his friends know what he is up against, and the few who do know find it impossible to say anything. You can't offer pity to a man like that — he's entirely above it — and the best sympathy seems cheap." Fenton paused, with the quick chin-lift and firm set of the lips that often punctuated thoughts left incomplete in words. "It's tough," he added presently; and as if this were a sufficient summing-up of the case, he said no more.

Alice mentally supplied what Jeff and Lottie had already told her. "When I struck Rothney three years ago," Jeff had said one day, "I bet you I was the loneliest, homesickest kid that ever bought a quarter-section from the R. L. & I. The doctor back in Indiana had told me I must get out of the grocery store

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and rough it in the open for a while. Well, I roughed it good and plenty, getting my first flax crop off the new breaking. The smut was terrible that season; I guess I'd have pulled up stakes and gone back East if Mr. Fenton had n't boosted and jollied me along — and lent me money twice when I got stuck." Fenton's interest in the young man had not lessened when Jeff, in a fit of uncommonly low spirits, confided that he had a sweetheart "back in Indiana" who he feared might weary of waiting while he broke ground and raised smutted flax in the Northwest. "He told me not to give up the game, but to get in and win," said Jeff. "He fixed it so I could go to Indiana that Fall and find out whether Lottie was really tired of waiting; I could n't afford the trip, but Mr. Fenton gave me some business as agent for the R. L. & I., all expenses paid. And six weeks later I was married and brought Lottie back with me!" Jeff's talk related chiefly to this earlier period; he said little about the events of the past eighteen months, in reference to which Lottie was so voluble. "When Jeff was sick that time, and Dr. Crane told him he must go to Rochester for an examination, and maybe have an operation, we did n't know which way to turn," ran Lottie's story. "We had hardly any money in the bank, because Jeff had just paid off the mortgage and a big implement-bill. I'm sure I don't know what in the world we'd have done if it had n't been for Mr. Fenton. He insisted on Jeff going to Rochester, and gave him a check to cover all the cost. We were so thankful when the

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doctors decided that he did n't need an operation after all."

"I had not understood that Mr. Hayward's condition was hopeless," said Alice, after she had correlated Fenton's brief statement with Lottie's detailed account. "Does his wife know?"

"Not as yet. At the time Jeff got back, she was in no condition to be told the truth, and he has never brought himself to telling her since. I think it is better for her to remain in ignorance as long as possible. Lottie is a good little soul, but she has n't Jeff's point of view in regard to anything, and she could n't help him much if she knew the facts — it would only lengthen out the agony for her. I believe I'll drive up to the house and see how Jeff is to-night. He looked like a ghost when he was in town yesterday."

The wagon spun along the dusty wheel-track that led toward the little tar-paper shack with the wild-cucumber vines climbing its chocolate-colored front and the bright flowers blooming on each side of the low-browed door; to Alice's eyes the place seemed to have been suddenly draped in mourning. Attracted by the sound of wheels, Lottie Hayward appeared at the door of the shack. Her careworn, freckled face brightened as she recognized her visitors; she came out to meet them, throwing her checked gingham apron backward under one arm and running a corrective touch over her fly-away pompadour.

"Can't you get out and stop a while, Miss Delamere?" she asked. "Yes, you can — just a minute.

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Why, Jeff's been feeling real mean all day, Mr. Fenton. He worked some this morning, but he had to give up this afternoon. He's out at the barn, now, talking to Tom. My, ain't it a pretty evening?" she continued, as she stood by the door-step with Alice after Fenton had gone in search of Jeff. "I've been so busy I did n't take time to look out. Charlotte got sleepy early and I had to put her to bed before I'd done my supper dishes—so that's how I've still got on my apron." She gave an apologetic whisk to the checked gingham and tucked it back once more under her arm. The apron was specklessly clean, like everything else in Lottie's domain. Her one-room shack, converted into a cozy suite by cleverly devised screens and curtains, was an altar of cleanliness before which her little red hands offered up unremitting service. "Yes, thank you, Charlotte's real well. I often think what a mercy it is she keeps so well; with my husband so poorly I don't know what I should do if baby was ailing too."

Her eyes filled. Her whole expression showed the wear of constant, ill-defined dread; she seemed very young, and all unprepared to meet the sorrow that awaited her around the next turn of the road.

"Jeff ought to tell her," thought Alice; aloud she said gently, "I am glad to know that Mr. Hayward took some rest this afternoon. I think it would be well for him to do so every day."

"That's what I say, too. I'm at him all the time to take better care of himself. He don't need to work

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so much, now he's got Tom to help, but he's never happy unless he's pottering away at something all day long. If he could only eat more, it would n't seem so bad, but he can't eat hardly anything; the doctors ordered him to give up all the things he likes best."

"The doctors must know what is good for him."

"Well, I *hope* they do." Lottie sighed, then summoned a smile. "Come and see Jeff's heliotrope, Miss Delamere. It's in full bloom now, and Jeff is tickled to death over it."

She led the way to the south side of the shack, where her husband's choicest flowers — hardy annuals that had begun life in boxes on the window-sill while the keen March winds were still shaving the frozen ground — blossomed far in advance of the late northern season. There was a flower-bed in every spot that could be spared for the purpose; even the fire-break at the edge of the yard glowed with a harmless flame of portulaca. Surrounded by hopes that would never mature and plans that would never bear fruit, Jeff had sought refuge in the culture of swift-growing plants that could be forced to speedy development, and each time one of them reached its goal he exulted in the fact that he had lived to see it win.

Chattering incessantly, Mrs. Hayward plucked a flower here and there and fashioned a bouquet to be shared by Alice with Mrs. Bowen. The fire in the western sky had sunk to the dull glow of a brazier; in its lowered slant of light the darkening fields seemed to rise above their noonday level, while distant buildings

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and telephone poles, that attracted little notice at meridian, sprang up in vivid projection. Against the southern horizon the city of Rothney wrote its signature of gables and spires in a notched line that might be read for many miles. "It surely is a pretty evening," smiled Lottie. "I don't know when I've seen the sky so pink."

Jeff approached the house, walking slowly at Fenton's side. He did not look the hero; his long, lank form, bending backward at the waist and forward at the shoulders, had neither grace nor dignity of pose. Illness had added greatly to his apparent age; over his wrinkled, pallid face played a persistent little smile that often seemed incongruous, sometimes almost grotesque. Yet he was already a victor, this old-young man with his bowed spine and starved limbs; he had slain dragons of fear and despair that might well have daunted a Siegfried, and now stood between life and eternity, looking from one to the other with kindly, fearless gaze.

He was telling Fenton of some small improvements that he intended to make about the place; now and then he drew a thin hand from the pocket of his corduroys and jerked a loose gesture supposed to be illustrative. Fenton listened with interest, asking a question or two. Nothing in the manner of either man implied the tragic knowledge that they shared. When the visitors drove away, Lottie and Jeff stood looking after them; his hands were in his pockets, her arm was slipped through his, her fly-away pompadour nestled close to his bowed

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shoulder. Alice turned to wave a second good-bye; Fenton, driving quickly, did not look back.

"Is there any chance that the doctors were mistaken?" asked Alice after a pause. "It seems so cruel for Jeff to die."

"I fear it's a plain case," Fenton answered. "He has already held out longer than they thought he could. He's living on pluck — and *love*."

He turned and looked into the April mist of Alice's lifted eyes, and as if lighted by a spark from his kindling glance her fair face suddenly flamed. Neither spoke again as the road-wagon sped through the rosy twilight to Willow Branch.

Mrs. Bowen was sitting on the veranda, wrapped in a white woollen shawl, when the wagon dashed lightly up to the steps. "Well, I was beginning to wonder what on earth had become of you!" she chided. "You've been gone long enough to drive to Grantham and back."

"Yes, Aunt Julia, we deserve a scolding this time," admitted Alice. "We drove to watch the sunset and then called at the Hayward Farm. Lottie sent you these flowers."

Mrs. Bowen buried her nose in the heliotrope, forgetting to scold. "My, how lovely!" she sighed. "I never did see anything like Jeff's luck with flowers. How does he seem to-night, Johnny?"

Fenton stood beside the wagon, the reins gathered in his hand, while answering Mrs. Bowen's inquiry. As he prepared to drive away her voice arrested him. "Oh — Johnny," she began hesitantly, and paused.

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"Well, Mrs. Bowen?"

"I don't know but what you'll have to speak to Chan before you go. He's been disobeying orders again. Yes, he's been smoking. I found a lot of cigarette-ends on his dressing-table this morning, and when I spoke to him about it he answered back, real saucy. Afterward I sent him out to weed the lettuce-bed, thinking it'd do him good to get out in the sunshine instead of staying so much in that stuffy little workshop of his; but he didn't weed the bed—he went off to the swimming-hole and stayed there all afternoon without any dinner."

"Hm — very well. Thank you for telling me. I'll attend to him." Fenton stepped into the wagon and drove off toward the barn.

Mrs. Bowen gave a hitch to her shawl. "I do wish Chan would behave himself!" she exclaimed. "This is the third time I've had to report on his smoking and the second time he's run off to the swimming-hole. I'm afraid it'll go hard with him this time. Johnny told him last Saturday that if he caught him smoking cigarettes again he'd give him a good thrashing."

"It is dreadful for the child to smoke cigarettes, but I don't see why he should n't be allowed to go swimming," said Alice.

"Well, you see the water in that swimming-hole never gets the chill off it even in the warmest weather, and if Chan was to go diving into it when he was over-hot, like as not it'd give him his death—he's had this bronnichal trouble all his life, and he takes cold very

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easy. That's why Johnny won't let him go there. There's plenty of other places in the river where the water's warmer and not so deep, but Chan thinks he must go to the swimming-hole because the Nelson and McDonald boys go there. P'r'aps I'd ought to 've told Johnny that Chan swore at me this morning; but I guess he'll punish him enough without knowing that."

The cottonwood lane passed the side of the house and widened into a large yard in the rear bordered by stables and machine-sheds, with a red water-tank and lofty wind-pump towering in the midst. From her seat in the corner of the veranda, Alice looked down into the yard, where she saw Otto Erickson jogging about his evening tasks, and Channing Doty idly making slashes in the horse-trough with a sharp jack-knife. At sight of Fenton, the boy straightened himself with an air of defiance that did not altogether conceal his trepidation. Fenton advanced, drawing off his gloves; he said something, in response to which Chan closed the jack-knife and stuffed it into his pocket. Fenton then took the boy by the collar and marched him off at a slow, relentless pace toward the machine-shed which Chan used as a work-shop. The two disappeared from view, Alice's imagination following them apprehensively. It seemed hardly possible that Fenton would be cruel, but wholly probable that he might be severe; and Chan looked so little beside him!

"I have not quite understood about this boy," said Alice to Mrs. Bowen. "Why is Mr. Fenton acting as his guardian? I suppose Chan is an orphan."

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“Worse than that, poor child!” said Mrs. Bowen, gravely. “His mother was a girl that worked at the City Hotel years ago, and nobody knows who his father was. She went off and left the baby at Tim Donahue’s — Tim’s first wife was some sort of relation to her, and so long ’s she lived I guess the baby had pretty good care. After she died and Tim married again, things were diff’rent. Tim was a worthless fellow, tipsy half the time, and folks said the second wife had a terrible temper and led the fam’ly a hard life of it. They moved to Park Valley three years ago, and soon afterwards Chan ran away and came back to Rothney — walked every step of the way, and it’s all of thirty miles. When Johnny heard his story he took the matter up himself, went into court and proved that Tim Donahue was n’t a fit person to have charge of the boy, and the next thing we heard he’d had himself appointed Chan’s guardian. I did n’t know what to think of it. I said to him, ‘Johnny, why on earth did you saddle yourself with such a care?’ And he said, looking more solemn than I’ve ever seen him look before or since, ‘Mrs. Bowen, that poor kid has n’t a friend in the world. It’s an outrage the way he’s been treated, and I can’t stand by and see any more of such devil’s work.’ Johnny don’t often use strong language, but somehow it did n’t seem out of place that time, considering what he was talking about. Well, he sent Chan to a boys’ boarding-school down in Iowa where they teach the pupils useful trades and give partic’lar attention to their health and conduct. Chan is not very

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quick at books, but they think he'll make a good cabinet-maker if he lives to grow up; he has a real knack with tools — you may've noticed that he's always whittling. Give him a knife and a stick of wood and he can turn out little figures that would surprise you. Johnny lets him have all the materials he wants for his wood-carving. He's cert'nly giving the boy every chance; and he really is n't any more severe with him than he has to be to keep him straight." These last words suggested that Mrs. Bowen might be arguing against an anxiety similar to Alice's.

Their suspense did not last long; in less than ten minutes Fenton and his ward reappeared. Alice rejoiced to see that Chan's face, though pale and sullen, showed no trace of tears. He hung back, shuffling, from the stern grasp on his shoulder, his eyes doggedly fixed upon the ground, his long eyelashes describing dark half-circles upon his white cheeks. In the light of what Mrs. Bowen had just related to her, Alice keenly felt the contrast between guardian and ward. She felt sorry for them both — especially Chan; it might have been better if he had fallen into the hands of a commoner man than John Fenton — one who did not reveal so plainly in every line of face and form and in every prompting of conduct, the inherited qualities and instincts of the well-born gentleman. Alice Delamere was too thorough an aristocrat herself to misread the signs of like quality in others; a quiet and unassuming little lady she seemed, moving at ease under all conditions, never at a loss in the treatment of her social

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inferiors, always courteous to every one — even to the worst snobs of her acquaintance — and never alluding to the fact that she possessed more than a dozen qualifications for membership in the Daughters of the Revolution, and nearly as many claims to the rank of Colonial Dame. She sometimes wore at her throat a little clasp of gold and blue enamel which signified her association with the latter order; she was wearing it this evening, as she sat watching John Fenton and Channing Doty, sympathizing with the one and pitying the other.

Released by Fenton, the boy shot off out of sight like some wild thing freed from a trap. Fenton crossed the lane to the house and seated himself on the top step of the veranda, throwing aside his hat with a quick gesture. "Each time I punish that boy," he said in a repressed tone, "I vow that I will never tackle the job again."

"I—I hope you didn't whip him very hard, Johnny," ventured Mrs. Bowen.

"Of course not! My only difficulty is to do it thoroughly enough to convince him that I mean business. It's absolutely the only way to make any impression upon him — yet it makes *me* feel like a contemptible coward! . . . He attempted to justify himself to-night — I was glad of that, at any rate; usually he won't say a word in his own behalf, though I always give him a chance. He says that he did start to weed the lettuce-bed this morning, and pretty soon Christine came along and gave him some gratuitous

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instructions about his work. That was what made him fly off at a tangent. He says he 'won't be bossed by that Swede girl.'"

"But I had told him what to do, Johnny. He should 've gone ahead and done it, and paid no attention to Christine."

"Yes, I know that. I don't say that his explanation is an excuse, but at least it throws light on the subject. Christine will have to understand that it is not her place to give orders to Chan. To be sure, this is only one part of Chan's misbehavior. He had nothing to say about the cigarettes — except to make his customary promise to let them alone hereafter."

"I'll speak to Christine and see that she don't interfere again. I s'pose she don't realize that it's out of place — we've always treated her so much like one of the fam'ly. She's a good-hearted girl, but she's got a sharp tongue, and she don't like Chan very well, anyway."

To Mrs. Bowen the duty of administering rebuke was so distasteful that she always hastened its performance before her sense of the necessity had begun to cool. She arose at once, and went in search of the offending Christine.

"That's it — that's the trouble," said Fenton, gloomily; and while Alice was tracing the relation of the detached remark he went on, "Nobody likes Chan very well. He invites dislike by being on the lookout for it. He feels that every man's hand is against him. Ever since he was old enough to know anything he has

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been given to understand that his very existence is a shame to himself and an imposition upon society. I'm afraid that I took him in hand too late to undo the harm that had been done, though I had great hopes of him, two years ago; I thought that a boy who would voluntarily break with depraved associates must have some of the right stuff in him. I've been disappointed since — more disappointed than I can say. Chan seems to think that his falsehood and disobedience are such trifles in comparison with the vices of that Park Valley gang that they ought to be condoned. I would n't mind his disobedience so much if he would only tell the truth — but so long as I can't *trust* him —"

It was unusual for John Fenton to speak so impulsively or with such heat. He seemed to become aware that he was thinking aloud for Alice Delamere's benefit, and ceased speaking with an abrupt readjustment of manner.

"Would n't it be well to make friends with Chan, first of all, even at the expense of discipline?" suggested Alice. "He might be led where he could not be driven."

He turned upon her reproachfully. "Do you think I have n't tried that?" he rejoined. "I've tried everything — everything! I started with the idea that I would never use force in dealing with him, no matter what happened. When I placed him at Hampton Hall, where the rod is sometimes used subject to the approval of parents and guardians, I told the head master that I did n't want the boy flogged on any consideration —

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would rather have him suspended than that. Well, he was suspended all right before the Christmas holidays. I went down to the school and took him away myself; took him off for a little trip, kept him with me constantly, talked with him, reasoned with him, gave up my time to him for two whole weeks; and just as I began to think that some impression had been made he turned around and did a thing that — well, I thrashed him for it; there was nothing else to do. It straightened him out, too. They had no trouble with him at Hampton Hall the next semester. Do you think I am a brute? ”

Alice, her elbows on the veranda rail and her dimpled chin resting upon her clasped hands, looked down with a smile at the knitted brow and compressed lips of the man who, sitting at her feet, looked up and challenged her with this blunt question. “No, Mr. Fenton,” she replied, wisely shaking her head, “but I fear you are not so good a psychologist as I thought you were.”

“What do you mean? ”

“You are not making due allowance for poor Chan. You have expected him to accept good counsels as readily as you would have accepted them yourself at his age. It is n't likely that you could ever raise him to your own level or make him a gentleman like yourself, if you labored with him for a lifetime. It is a more complex problem than training Bob, the broncho, to look like a thoroughbred.”

Fenton turned from her slowly. The change that ran through his attitude — the bowing of his head, the

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relaxed drop of a half-opened hand that had been clenched a moment since — vaguely startled her. She saw that her words had given offence, had deeply wounded him.

“I beg your pardon, Mr. Fenton,” she said quickly. “I have no wish to make light of a serious matter, and perhaps I have no right to speak at all. I know you are sincere in the wish to do what is best for Chan; but I also believe that if you *could* put yourself in his place for a moment and imagine how life must look to one in his unfortunate position, you would be more sympathetic, and that might strengthen your hold upon him.”

Mrs. Bowen emerged from the house and resumed her rocking-chair, crossing her shawl over her ample bosom. Her manner was slightly disturbed yet expressive of relief. “Christine apologized very nicely,” she said. “She was real sorry she’d made trouble for Chan, and she’s promised to be more careful in future.”

Fenton arose, reaching with a deliberate gesture for the hat he had impetuously flung from him a few moments before. “Thank you, Mrs. Bowen,” he said simply. “Good night. Good night, Miss Delamere.” And without further words, he left them.

CHAPTER VII

IN CHAN'S WORKSHOP

ABOUT this time, the manufacture of Miss Delamere's novel came to an abrupt halt. The fires of imagination died out, the engines of thought ceased to throb, the looms of fancy stood still in the midst of the unfinished web — and all because the secondary hero had declined to work any longer under the existing schedule.

His grievance was just. His share in the story typified the productive energy of honest toil, while Clarence, the ostensible hero, represented the spendthrift idleness of a privileged leisure class. All the important acts were performed by the secondary hero, all the brilliant speeches were his; he it was whose qualities of mind and heart would enlist the sympathy of the reader and whose memory would be green long after Clarence was forgotten. Yet technically he was the mere foil of Clarence, and general utility-man of the piece. Alice had resorted oftener than she realized to the expedient of shifting the difficult work to the secondary hero; the crisis which now confronted her was the cumulative result of this policy, and she admitted that the utility-man must either be sustained in the prominence to which his services entitled him, or else be thrust ruthlessly

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into the background. Knowing that either course would involve the sacrifice of much excellent copy, Alice tried for two days to conciliate the secondary hero. Vain effort! — he would not speak his lines, he obstinately refused to obey even the simplest stage directions.

“Very good, my young friend!” she exclaimed, tossing her manuscript into the table-drawer and turning the key upon it. “You shall be left in solitary confinement for a while. You may find that I can hold out as long as you can.”

The humor of the passing thought afforded meagre consolation; the fact that she could jest at her own dilemma only served to prove how little her heart was in the work that baffled her. Sometimes it almost seemed as if she were separated from her novel by a non-conductor. Taking a copy of “Ardietta” from the shelf above the table she slowly turned the pages, reading here and there. “Did *I* write this? — was it really I?” she asked herself; and though her heart ached as she read on and on, she felt subtly comforted. She looked toward the height of inspiration, on which this first novel had been written, as a homesick wanderer looks toward the distant fatherland; though she might never return thither from the lower plane of her present effort, the height would remain — though her new book should fail, “Ardietta” would endure as a monument of success.

She replaced the book on the shelf, put away her writing-materials, and gathering up an armful of

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magazines which she had lately allowed to accumulate unread, she went down stairs and out into the shady veranda. Mrs. Bowen had gone to attend the weekly meeting of the Ladies' Missionary Society; though she was by no means a noisy person, her absence gave a keen edge to the silence of the darkened living-room and empty veranda. The day was bright and mellow, with less breeze than usual; the flax-field that spread between the house and the road had reached its daily high-tide of color — a bright, shimmering blue. In the distance rustled a field of crisp, golden oats, nearly ready for the binder, while close beyond the cottonwood lane a small patch of barley, already in the shock, gave the prelude to the harvest symphony. The only sounds that rose above the sustained murmur of the cottonwoods were the scraps of a weird, tuneless ditty that floated from the direction of the kitchen — Christine Larson sang for the very joy of life, and not at all because she had an ear for music — and the faint rasp of saw and chisel that came from the open door of Channing Doty's work-shop. The latter sounds caught the attention of Alice Delamere as she sat in the hammock with her magazines; glancing down the length of the yard she perceived Chan at his bench, bent nearly double over an intricate piece of scrollwork. For the past week the shop had been deserted in favor of a more novel scene of activity; with the assistance of the Nelson and McDonald boys, Chan had been building a shack on the bank of the willow-fringed creek that meandered through the pasture-lot. Mr. Fenton had permitted the

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enterprise and had furnished the necessary lumber, but one day something happened — Alice did not know what — that put a stop to proceedings, and after an emotional demonstration described by Mrs. Bowen as a “tantrum,” Chan had returned to his wood-carving in sullen solitude. Alice had scarcely seen the boy since the evening of his recent punishment for cigarette smoking, but she had thought of him oftener than in all the previous weeks of her stay at Willow Branch. She had advised John Fenton to make friends with his ward; the advice had given offence at the time, and though Fenton had apparently forgotten the incident by the time they next met — clearly he was not one to cherish resentments — Alice remembered it with a tinge of self-rebuke. What right had she to criticise the partial failure of Fenton's consistent if mistaken effort to make friends with Chan, when she herself, living under the same roof with the boy for weeks, had placidly ignored his very existence? . . . After pondering this question for a moment, Alice laid the magazines in the hammock and quitting the veranda she sauntered down the lane and across the yard to the work-shop.

Chan looked up at her in surly surprise. He classified Miss Delamere as a “stuck-up city girl,” and he liked her none the better for the fact that she inspired him with a degree of awe.

“May I sit here and watch you?” she asked.

He gave his head an ambiguous jerk which Alice interpreted as a sign of consent. She seated herself on a stool at one end of the littered bench, and for a time

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she was silent, observing the boy's bent shoulders, screwed brow, and lean nervous hands. The grasp of his tools seemed tense and almost tremulous, yet it was deft and sure.

"What kind of wood is that, Chan?"

"Basswood."

"Does it grow in this neighborhood?"

"Not right 'round here. Further east—'round Grantham."

"It's a bracket, is n't it?"

He nodded.

"It is very pretty."

To this Chan deigned no reply. Alice's next question, relating to his tools, he answered less grudgingly, and by degrees her tactful inquiries drew forth a sketchy account of the work he had done at boarding-school, where he had been at the head of his class in joinery and in a class by himself in fancy carving. He did not seem to know that his accomplishments were remarkable for a boy of his years; possibly his extreme backwardness in other studies had restrained the natural impulse of pride in his one talent.

"I took first prize in 'riginal design, last Fall," he said carelessly. "It was a stalk of bitten golden-rod on a teakwood panel. Never saw a bitten golden-rod? Oh, I guess you must 've seen it; it's common enough. There's some kind of a bug that bites the stem and makes it grow out in a big lump, even all 'round like an onion. It don't kill it, though; it keeps right on growin'. Sometimes there'll be two or three lumps on

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one stalk. I put three on mine." With a slow twist of the tongue Chan transferred a quid of spearmint gum from one cheek to the other. He had mastered the art of unobtrusive rumination in the classroom while pursuing the regular curriculum. "The prize was five dollars. I put it in my bank. I'm savin' money to buy a gasolene engine to turn my lathe."

"It was fine that you got the prize," said Alice, cordially. "I should like to see that panel. Is this a drawing-book?" She touched a dog-eared folio that lay on the bench. "Do you mind if I look at it?"

"You can look at it if you want to, but it ain't any good. It's designs that I did out of school."

Alice opened the book with the light, sympathetic touch that made her hands almost as expressive as her lips or eyes. She found page after page of vaguely-hinted designs that had never been developed, followed by others upon which Chan had wrought long in vain, smearing them with erasures and finally destroying them by wild, furious pencil-strokes that deeply indented the leaves beneath. At the back of the book was work of a later period, much neater in execution. The strange warp of the boy's imagination was everywhere apparent; his studies of still-life dealt only with imperfect specimens — blighted flower, stunted leaf, crippled branch and cankered fruit — in the midst of which appeared a crudely drawn but recognizable sketch of a butcher-bird impaling a sparrow upon a thorn. In the conventional designs, serpents and monsters prevailed.

Chan watched Miss Delamere out of the corner of his

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eye, hoping to find her shocked by the ugliness of his inventions; it was much better fun to shock people than to please them. But Alice, remembering that she was a self-invited guest in Chan's work-shop, preserved a mien of courteous, uncritical interest.

"This is remarkably well drawn," she said at last, indicating a design for a cornice formed by the entwined bodies, arched heads, and forked tongues of serpents. "You have talent, my boy."

Chan's expression changed. His eye rested affectionately upon the reptilian composition. "I took third-year mechanical drawing last term," was his oblique reply. "It helped me a lot."

"Yes. I don't pretend to know very much about such things, but I can see that this piece is far ahead of anything else in the book. Would it be very difficult to carve?"

"Oh, I d' know. I s'pose I could do it if I had a decent knife. Could n't do it with any of these tools I've got here." He flung down one knife and caught up another as he spoke. A gleam of ill-temper flared across his face; as it passed he again glanced furtively at Miss Delamere, who remained calmly silent. Her gaze travelled over the tools that lay scattered about; she saw that they were of brilliant blue steel with polished horn handles, evidently the best that money could buy. Chan blushed, feeling dimly ashamed of himself.

"Did you ever try a wild-rose design?" asked Alice. "The wild-rose is the State flower, is n't it? If you

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carved it in some of the woods that grow here, it would make a fine piece to exhibit at the State Fair, and you might take another first prize. I'd try for it if I were you."

"State Fairs ain't any good," muttered Chan.

Unable to argue this sweeping proposition, Alice let it pass. "When are you going to finish your shack?" she inquired, reminded of the incomplete structure by catching sight of its roof over a ridge of dipping ground, where the pasture-lot dropped to the level of the creek.

"I ain't a-goin' to finish it!" snapped Chan.

"Why not?" Her tone conveyed such frank and innocent concern that he could not help replying.

"'Cause I can't have things the way I want 'em," he said hotly. "If I can't have 'em fixed right, I'll not have 'em at all."

Alice waited for the smoke of this small explosion to clear away before she asked, "What was the trouble?"

"I wanted a stove," said Chan, clenching his teeth. "The shack was no good without a stove. And Mr. Fenton would n't let me have one."

"Oh!" After a short silence Alice elicited a description of the article that Fenton had proscribed — a camp-shanty stove that would burn anything from anthracite coal to bunch-grass.

"I wanted to take some of my own money out of my bank to buy it, and he would n't even let me do that," said the boy, bitterly; adding under his breath, "I call it damn mean."

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"What would such a stove cost?"

"I could get a dandy one for five dollars."

"Did Mr. Fenton think it too expensive?"

Chan's answer came less readily this time. "He said it was n't safe," he mumbled. "That's what he said."

Alice did not pursue the subject. A few moments later she rose to leave the shop; knowing that the task of making friends with Chan could not be accomplished all at once, she was content with her small beginning. As she turned to go she paused, laying her hand lightly on his shoulder. "Don't you think you might sit straighter?" she suggested. "It is bad for your chest to lean so far over your work. Your spine is like a barrel-hoop. What would Mr. Fenton say if he could see you?"

The boy's lip curled. "Oh, he'd lick me, I s'pose," he replied sarcastically.

"About how often does Mr. Fenton lick you, Chan?"

He was silent.

"How often has he done so this Summer, since you came back from school?"

"Oh, I d' know!" blustered the boy, as if he were the last person from whom such statistics should be expected.

"Well," said Alice, "I think it has happened only twice. And if you chose to take matters into your own hands it would never happen again."

Chan looked his astonishment at this seditious utterance. He had often framed wild schemes for breaking Fenton's authority; he had thought of running

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away, and one night, not long ago, he had packed a bundle and set off on the county road to Rainsford. Before he passed Riverside his spirit had failed him; the miseries of the journey he had made on foot from Park Valley to Rothney were still too fresh in his memory to be disregarded even in the silvery warmth of bland midsummer moonlight. He had crept back home, deciding that he must make one more attempt to put up with Fenton's tyranny. "I don't see what I can do," he said to Alice. "He's my guardian."

She smiled into his gloomy, long-lashed gray eyes. "Just stop and think," she said. "Suppose you do something that you know to be wrong, or something that will injure you—smoking cigarettes, for example. Mr. Fenton talks to you about it, tells you what effect it will have upon your health, and warns you that if you do it again you will be punished for it. Still, you go on doing it, and when Mr. Fenton finds that you have persistently disobeyed him, he gives you a whipping. Is n't that the program?"

Chan bent once more to his work, ducking his head in abashed silence.

"So you see," Alice continued, "each act of Mr. Fenton's has followed some act of yours, and you could put a stop to the whole thing any minute. Your guardian does n't like to whip you, Chan; honestly, it is n't any more fun for him than it is for you. He does it only in the hope of saving you from the slower punishment that naturally follows all kinds of wrong-doing; he would far rather see you doing right on your own

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responsibility, without any correction from him. I daresay you have been told, until you are tired of hearing it, that it is your duty to respect older people; it is perfectly true, but there is another thing, equally true, which you may not have thought of — it is possible for a twelve-year-old boy to behave in such a manly, sensible way that all the older people will respect *him*! Would n't that be worth while? If I were you, Chan, I would n't rest until I had *compelled* Mr. Fenton's confidence and respect. And I would make up my mind that I would never have another 'licking' as long as I lived!"

She left the work-shop without stopping to note the effect of her words. She did not know how Chan would receive such plain speaking from a comparative stranger, but some instinct assured her that she had not gone very far amiss in her method of approaching him. Seated once more in the hammock with an open magazine in her hand, she looked back toward the work-shop, and smiled confidently. "We are going to be friends, Chan, whether you like it or not," she thought.

CHAPTER VIII

'ALICE' AS SPONSOR FOR CHAN

THE evening mail brought Alice a letter from her publisher, to the consideration of which she gave up some of the hours usually allotted to peaceful slumber. Next morning her reply was ready, and as she drove to town with Mrs. Bowen she told that lady what she had written.

"I'm glad to know that you've decided to be sensible at last," said Mrs. Bowen. "I never could see any sense in your masquerading as 'Sarah Gray.' As the publisher says, the truth's bound to come out some day, and it may's well come out now, before your new book is printed."

"Yes, it is now if ever," admitted Alice. "He thinks it may help 'Ardietta,' too — the sales have fallen off thirty per cent in the past month."

"That's natural enough. At the rate it's been selling, I should think pretty near everybody must own a copy by this time."

Arrived in town, Mrs. Bowen drove to Saxton's dry-goods emporium — a pioneer mercantile concern which she had patronized ever since coming to Rothney, and which had known no competition worth mentioning until this very day, when Smith's new department store,

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the first real department store west of Grantham, opened for business across the street. Being a loyal soul, Mrs. Bowen pulled her little phaeton up to the door of Saxton's with scarce a look at its rival. "I've always traded at Saxton's, and I expect to go on trading there," she declared. "We might stop in at Smith's, though, before we go home — just to see how things look."

Smith's establishment had been rushed to completion after many delays and was still very raw; its broad windows were flecked with paint and the sidewalk in front showed the limy trail of mortar left by the masons in their hasty exit. No secret was made of the carpenter work that still went on within, but both within and without, the building was gay with canvas signs that bade every one welcome to the "great first day's sale," and already the varnished doors were swinging rapidly for the passage in and out of many visitors. As Mrs. Bowen's phaeton halted at Saxton's, an electric runabout wheeled smoothly from Smith's main entrance and came purring across the street. Miss Isabelle Peck sat in the runabout, and beside her sat a tall, fair girl whose gauntleted hand controlled the lever of the machine — a Gibson girl in figure but more vivacious in expression than are most variants from the type. "Why, there's Mad'line Allingham!" exclaimed Mrs. Bowen in a quick aside to Alice.

The occupants of phaeton and runabout alighted at Saxton's door simultaneously, and Mrs. Bowen introduced Miss Allingham to Miss Delamere. As Alice took the girl's hand and looked up into her beautiful

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eyes she found ample and convincing reason for the admiration which John Fenton was supposed to cherish for Madeline; no man could help admiring so exquisite a creature. Indeed, Madeline travelled through life enveloped by admiration as a planet is surrounded by its atmosphere, attended by a host of satellites. She had inherited from her father a gift for leadership — a gift so embellished by lovable girlish graces that it might escape recognition as the same power whereby Loudon B. Allingham dominated men in politics and finance. Outwardly she was a thorough Allingham, her resemblance to her Aunt Harriet Van Alstyne having caused much heart-burning to her Aunt Isabelle Peck. Miss Peck always stoutly maintained that the girl had “Anna’s eyes,” and fortunately this was true; Madeline’s parents had transmitted to her all that was best in themselves — she had escaped the one discordant feature of the Allingham physiognomy, while Anna Peck’s sole claim to beauty sparkled anew in the daughter’s radiant glance.

“Have you shopping to do, Miss Delamere?” asked Madeline. “Neither have I! Let me take you for a spin while Mrs. Bowen and Aunt Belle are in the shop. We can be back long before they are ready to leave.”

Alice took Miss Peck’s place in the runabout. Under Madeline’s guidance the little machine glided swiftly out Main Street toward the open fields, where solid ranks of heavy-headed wheat saluted the passing breeze and modest flax-plants slowly opened their blue eyes to the sunshine.

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"Do you enjoy motoring? I simply adore it! I think it's so sweet of Uncle Dave to let Aunt Maisie have this runabout when he is so violently opposed to all kinds of motor-cars. Have you heard him hold forth on the subject? It's positively funny. It may be that when automobiles first came into use he was prejudiced against them—I think I remember hearing him talk in that way when papa bought his first car; I was nothing but a toddler, then—but I believe he keeps on railing at them, now, because he is too obstinate to give in. Uncle Dave is such an obstinate old dear! Would you like to go faster, Miss Delamere? This machine is hardly more than a toy affair, but it has one more speed, and I'll put it on if you say so." Assured by Alice that the present speed was satisfactory, Madeline replied, "Well, sometimes I like to drive slowly myself." Her tone made the simple statement seem like a flattering confidence and a special tribute to Miss Delamere's judgment. Madeline's tone was everything—a veritable triumph of manner over matter; a verbatim report of her conversation does injustice equally to her and to the persons whom she fascinated. "Papa has just bought a new four-cylinder sixty-horse-power car, and I am planning to drive it up from Minneapolis next month—when I come for my annual house party at Riverside, you know. We had expected to come up in papa's private car—his railway car, the Palermo—but I've taken it into my head that it would be great fun to drive the motor, with four or five of the older guests, and let the rest travel in the

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Palermo. Mr. Sutherland is looking up the route, now. He is an Englishman, and the most expert motorist I know. He is not the least bit of a speed maniac, though; sometimes I wish he were not quite so sane as he is! Still, racing never interested me particularly. I think one gets so much more pleasure out of things if one does n't run them to extremes, don't you? With most people the devotion to some favorite pastime becomes absolute slavery. For my part, I like all kinds of sports. Last Autumn I had my first run after the hounds at my Aunt Harriet's country place in Maryland. It was Uncle Dave who taught me to ride, though; he deserves the credit for my being in at the finish, that day. Then, I enjoy yachting, and I can sail a boat pretty well if the sea is n't *too* heavy. I play decent golf and splendid tennis — I know you are thinking how absurdly conceited that sounds, are n't you? What I really mean is that I like all these things well enough to go in and win, without being what you could call a devotee of any of them." After a bare instant of silence the girl added, with a touch of playful shrewdness not unlike her Aunt Belle's, "Aunt Harriet often tells me that I am just like papa. He has never confined himself to one line of speculation, as so many men do. Railroads, mines, lands, utilities — I suppose there is nothing that he has n't taken a plunge in at some time or other, and he is equally at home in all."

In this vein Madeline chattered vivaciously until they returned to Saxton's, demanding nothing from Miss Delamere beyond an occasional assenting vote upon her

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own expressions of opinion. Yet her candid egoism gave no offence; she was merely passing through that intermediate stage of social training in which our young girls practise the technique of graceful self-assertion, having already mastered the dull rudiments of listening and being not yet sufficiently advanced for the higher art of drawing out the thoughts of others.

Mrs. Bowen and Miss Peck emerged from the dry-goods emporium just as Madeline brought the runabout to a standstill under Sally's disdainful nose. "Have you been to Smith's opening?" asked Madeline as the ladies took leave of each other. "Oh, you must be sure to take that in! Aunt Belle and I paid our 'dis-respects,' as Uncle Dave would say, the minute we got into town. And be sure to have a glass of soda at the drug department — it's *fine*. We sampled it. Good-bye, Miss Delamere; so glad to have met you. Yes, thank you, Mrs. Bowen, I'm coming over to see you the first day I possibly can. I'm on the wing this time — going back to Minneapolis to-night on Number Eight. Good-bye!"

The runabout went spinning off down the road to Riverside, while Mrs. Bowen coaxed Sally across the street to Smith's, reiterating her statement that she "did n't expect to buy anything" but merely wished to "see how things looked" in the new department store. Many of the visitors at the first day's sale came thus in the avowed character of spectators, but few went away without buying something; it would have seemed base ingratitude to leave the place empty-handed,

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when Mr. Smith and his assistants were so genial and hospitable and the prices of things were marked so temptingly low. At last even Mrs. Bowen fell victim to the artless good-will of a young saleswoman who had been a member of her Sunday-school class, and under the witchery of the girl's cheery smile she bought six yards of checked apron gingham. After the goods had gone to the wrapping-desk and the girl had turned to wait on another customer, Mrs. Bowen realized what she had done.

"I ought n't to 've bought that apron-check," she murmured in an aside meant for the ear of Alice Delamere. "I don't need it, no more 'n a cat!"

"'Buy what thou hast no need of, and erelong thou shalt sell thy necessities,'" said an orotund voice at her elbow.

It was not Alice who spoke. Mrs. Bowen turned to find herself confronted by the Honorable Edward Kenney, who was standing so close beside her in the narrow aisle that his broad shoulder almost touched her bonnet. He took off his hat and bowed low with the profound gallantry that he showed toward all women, old and young; it was part of his method, in dealing with women, to make the oldest ladies of his acquaintance feel that in his eyes, at any rate, they were still young and charming. Needless to say, his manner failed to impress Mrs. Bowen, who drew back with a rather cool reply to his greeting.

"Our city makes a good showing to-day — a good showing on both sides of the counter," said the mayor,

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narrowing his keen eyes to a slit as he swept a look around the store. "Smith has kept his word to the public, and thrown open his doors on the date advertised, though much of his best new stock is still unpacked. And the public have rewarded his good faith. He told me just now that he has already done more business this morning than he had expected to do in a whole day. Have you been here long, Mrs. Bowen?"

"No. Not long." She watched anxiously for the return of her parcel, fatefully lingering at the desk, and wished that the mayor had not singled her out as the special object of his attentions. She was glad that Alice had wandered away to another department; in the distance she saw the girl's flower-crowned hat and pink gown against a background of shining nickle-plated hardware, and she was not long ignorant of the fact that Mr. Kenney saw them too.

For five minutes by the clock — and for a much longer period by Mrs. Bowen's computation — the mayor kept his place at the widow's side, talking against time and waiting the opportunity that did not come. He was elegantly attired in a black frock suit with white waistcoat and silk hat, and felt himself every inch a gentleman; yet it was when supplemented by the greatest external advantages that Edward Kenney's self-made gentlemanhood revealed the manufacturer's stamp most unmistakably. He incidentally accounted for his formal dress by mentioning that he expected a party of gentlemen on the east-bound train from Burnside, the State capital, to be his guests at an eleven o'clock

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breakfast. The men were prominent politicians whose names, as Mr. Kenney carelessly let them fall, failed of their intended effect upon Mrs. Bowen, whose mind was too preoccupied to absorb the full significance of the fact that Colonel Nicholas Hartshorne headed the list of the mayor's distinguished guests. She had not even noticed the frock coat.

And still that useless apron gingham tarried at the wrapping-desk!

Meanwhile, Alice Delamere was in serious consultation with the clerk of the hardware department over the merits of two small stoves. "If you wanted to stay on your claim right through the Winter," said the clerk — the hypothesis was his own — "why, then, you'd want the larger stove; but for spring weather or even pretty late in the Fall — Oh, good morning, Mr. Fenton! How are you? — why, this little Merrimac would exactly fill the bill. It's the neatest thing on the market. I sold an awful lot of them out in Wardner County last year, and they always gave satisfaction."

Alice's perplexed look brightened as she saw John Fenton approaching. He had come, as had the honorable mayor and several other prominent business men, to testify civic interest in Mr. Smith's new store and to wish good luck to its genial proprietor. Catching sight of a flower-crowned hat, he had turned aside from the main aisle to verify his glimpse by a nearer view.

"I am so glad to see you, Mr. Fenton," said Alice. "You are just in time to advise me. Which of these stoves shall I buy?"

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"That depends upon what use you intend to make of it," he replied. "You must take me into your confidence before I can advise."

"There's not a better stove in town for the money," put in the sprightly clerk; then, his eagle eye lighting upon an elderly woman who was wandering uncertainly about the department, he excused himself to Alice and hastened to take the newcomer in charge.

"Mr. Fenton, will you allow me to buy one of these stoves and give it to Chan for his shack?"

Fenton's look of amused mystification gave place to a quick frown. "I have already told Chan that he cannot have a stove in his shack," he said briefly.

"Yes, so I heard from Chan yesterday. He said you considered it unsafe. He is terribly disappointed—he vows that he will not finish the shack."

"Well . . . better not to finish it than to burn it down about his ears. Miss Delamere, a stove could be given to him only on strict conditions, and those conditions would be violated the minute my back was turned. I tell you, he is not to be trusted."

Alice reflected for a moment. "Do you think I am to be trusted?" she asked.

"Yes, so far as I have had opportunity to observe, I should say that you are," he answered, a smile flickering across his gravity.

"Then let me be sponsor for Chan! Give him his foolish little stove and I will see that no harm follows. I promise that all conditions shall be fulfilled."

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"Miss Delamere, why do you ask this?" Fenton's tone softened; his eyes met hers in a look as earnest as her own.

"Because I think it might do Chan a world of good to have the one thing that his heart is set upon, and —" the clerk was returning "— I will answer for the consequences, Mr. Fenton."

"No better stove in town for the money," repeated the clerk, tapping his order-stub with his pencil. "Regular price six-twenty-five, marked down for this opening sale to four-ninety-eight."

"Very well, Martin. I'll take it. Put up your purse, Miss Delamere. I will pay for the stove and you can handle the fire insurance."

"Yes, sir. Yes, mahm," said the clerk, scribbling busily on his order-stub. He was so intent upon making sales this morning, that the oddity of the present transaction escaped his notice. "You'll want some stove-pipe, I suppose?"

"M-m — yes. About three lengths and an elbow, and a sheet-iron protector for the roof."

"What in the world are you folks doing here?" asked Mrs. Bowen, appearing at Alice's side.

"We are buying a stove," answered Fenton; and while he completed the purchase Alice related the circumstances leading up to it.

"Well, I never heard the like!" said Mrs. Bowen — which was probably true. "That was Ed Kenney, talking to me over at the dry-goods counter," she added

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in a lower tone. "I thought I'd never get rid of him. He was hinting 'round for an introduction to *you*, Alice."

"To *me*?" echoed Alice blankly.

"Yes. I knew you didn't want to meet him. I would n't speak to him myself if I could help it, but he never lets me forget that I used to know his wife. She was a nice little woman, poor thing! I did think I'd never get rid of him — I had to be real rude to him at last."

That evening Chan stood at the door of his workshop and gazed with dilating eyes at the stove, the three lengths of stovepipe, and the roof-protector that had been placed there without his knowledge during the preceding hour. At first he made no attempt to account for the sudden materialization of his heart's desire, but grasped eagerly at the reality, falling on his knees beside the stove and subjecting it to expert investigation. He did not know that Miss Alice was near until her voice broke across the rushing current of his thoughts.

"Well, Chan, what do you think of it?" she asked, smiling. "Is it the kind of stove you were describing to me yesterday?"

He fell back and looked up at her, his eyes sparkling. "Oh — it's a Jim-dandy!" he gasped. "But it — it ain't for *me*?"

"Yes, Mr. Fenton bought it for you, and you may have it on three conditions. First, you are not to build

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a fire on very hot days. Second, you are not to build a very big fire at any time. Third, you are to be sure that the fire is entirely out before you leave the shack at night. Now, Chan, I have given Mr. Fenton my own solemn promise and word of honor that you will observe these regulations. Do you agree?"

"'Course!" he retorted, half defiantly, a swift, sullen gloom dropping over his radiant expression like a shade over a lighted window. He got upon his feet and stood with head bent and face averted. "'Could 've promised Mr. Fenton that much myself, if he 'd 've let me," he muttered through shut teeth. "He believes *you* — he would n't believe *me*."

"Why, he will have to believe you if you keep your word," said Alice, ingenuously. "That's easy, Chan! By the way, there are a few other things that I did n't think of to-day. You must have a coffee-pot and a frying-pan; and as soon as you can make good coffee and fry bacon and flapjacks, I shall expect to be invited to luncheon in your shack."

The shadow lifted from his brow, and once more the light shone forth. "Aw, I can make coffee already — like a breeze," he said grandiloquently; then, overcome by a quick reaction of shyness, he stammered, "Th-thank you, Miss Alice," and bolted out of sight like a shot.

CHAPTER IX

JOHN FENTON LOOKS INTO THE PAST

GENERAL MANAGER JOHN FENTON has gone East on business," announced the next issue of the *Rothney Tribune*. "East," in this case, meant Chicago, and Fenton was absent about a week.

The trip was such as he often took in the interests of the R. L. & I., and the business was routine business; but its leisure intervals were filled by a most unusual train of introspective and retrospective thought. He found himself taking stock of his conduct at every memorable turning-point in his past life and checking up each decisive action against its voucher of motive. He could not tell what had started him upon this special accounting; as a rule the day-book of his active, practical, well-ordered existence demanded no verification.

Returning from Chicago, Fenton reached Minneapolis Sunday noon on a delayed train that missed connection with the day express for Rothney, and as usual when he found himself in the city over a midsummer Sunday, he took trolley for Minnetonka and spent the afternoon at one of the beautiful lakeside homes that always kept the latch-string out for him. To-day he chose to visit the cottage of a wealthy Hebrew banker who had been

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a warm personal friend of his for many years. His acquaintance with the banker's wife dated back to the early days of her former marriage to Willard Bennington, while she was still a beautiful, unhappy bride chafing under the hateful bond afterward severed by divorce, and while Fenton was a hot-headed young man at the most reckless period of his career. For a time they had stood side by side on the brink of an abyss. How they drew back from the danger unscathed in the eyes of the world and blameless in each other's sight, must ever remain a mystery; Fenton always chivalrously gave the credit to Norma, though he really deserved a larger share thereof than often falls to the lot of the man in such a case. Norma lived abroad for a year or two after her divorce. She was disappointed that John Fenton did not follow her across the Atlantic, and bitterly dissatisfied by the change that had come over him in her absence. He was still her good friend, ready at all times to serve her, but this fact offered little compensation for the loss of a lover. To some extent she was herself responsible for this loss; she had altered even more than he had, and had come back from Paris with a taste for cigarettes, cocktails, and roulette which perceptibly affected Fenton's maturing judgment of her.

All emotional experience has its sea-level of the commonplace, toward which its swift currents and headlong torrents inevitably tend. The attachment between John Fenton and the beautiful Norma reached this level after she married his friend Joseph Hirschmann. The banker and his wife had now completed two years of peaceful

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matrimony. Norma, though always a noticeable figure in society, had escaped adverse criticism; she limited her gambling to bridge and she showed discretion in the choice of time and place for the cigarettes and cocktails. Hirschmann adored her and trusted her implicitly. Fenton's position in relation to them both presented one of the familiar anomalies which form the corollary of certain accepted social sophistries. The past was ignored by all three.

Fenton was still engaged in taking stock when he made the Hirschmann cottage the object of his Sunday afternoon quest. He had thought less and less about Norma, as the years slipped by, until now her image never rose before him except when invoked by some direct reminder of her existence; yet when with her, he still felt something of the old fascination. He sought her presence to-day with the deliberate purpose of finding out exactly how much of this fascination remained, and with the definite intention of striking it off the books once for all.

In accordance with an arrangement made over the telephone, Joseph Hirschmann's launch met the trolley at Tonka Bay. "We all came — the whole family," said the banker genially, as he shook hands with Fenton on the platform. He was a man of ripe middle age, with a keen, kindly face, strongly racial in feature, and a broad olive cheek which, despite faithful daily use of the razor, always appeared to be about entering penumbra. Still grasping Fenton's hand he waved his left arm toward the launch which lay at the dock, gently

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heaving on the undertow of a large steamer that had just made landing at the next pier. Norma, gowned in white, leaned against the cushioned gunwale, shaded by silken curtains. Willard Bennington's two children came tumbling up from the launch to the dock and met the banker and his guest half-way, taking possession of Fenton as if he were their own special property. They were volatile, quarrelsome, lovable little creatures. While their mother was in Paris they had been left to the care of maternal relatives with whom they had been happy enough after their own ebullient fashion; on her return they renewed acquaintance with her in perfect good fellowship, and when she married Hirschmann they accepted him, too, with the adaptability which they had manifested at each stage of their checkered little lives. If they had occasion to mention their divorced parent—which they did without the slightest embarrassment—they spoke of him as “papa.” Joseph Hirschmann they called “father,” thus avoiding all confusion of terms.

Norma did not stir from her graceful, indolent attitude as she slowly lifted a round arm, gloved to the elbow, and laid her finger-tips in Fenton's outstretched hand. “Stranger—truant—*renegade!*” she said with a soft crescendo of emphasis on the reproachful words. “Where on earth have you kept yourself the past age? Joe often speaks of seeing you in town, but you are always in such a hurry to get through your business and hie back to Rothney that he cannot persuade you to come out to the lake.”

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"Oh, please don't begin like that, Norma!" protested Fenton. "Be merciful — pity the sorrows of a poor old man who has just got back from Chicago, where the mercury has been ninety-seven in the shade."

"So that's where you've been?" smiled the banker. "Hurry up, Monty! Come along, Edith! Father can't wait all day for you. Well, John, if you have been in Chicago this past week you have my sympathy, whatever Norma may say."

Norma smiled also, and drawing her little daughter toward her, re-tied the child's hair-ribbon with the air of a perfect actress performing a pretty bit of stage-business. The launch backed from the dock, slipped adroitly across the track of a slower boat that was putting out from shore, and skimmed the sparkling surface of the bay. Hirschmann steered, while Fenton, idly seated near Norma, took off his hat and let the breeze play over his bared forehead. Norma observed how handsome he looked in his pale gray tweeds and immaculate linen, but she also noted a few threads of gray in his dark hair — which seemed not quite so thick as it used to be — and saw lines in his brow that she had never noticed before. "Ah, John!" she thought with a repressed sigh. "Are we growing old at last?" She was thirty-five herself, but she would never look her age so long as her beauty remained the ward of the four watchful guardians — dressmaker, milliner, lady's-maid and hairdresser — whose business it was to keep her young. Except for a certain wonderful stability of complexion and expression, Norma Hirschmann

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might have passed for twenty, even in broad daylight; yet she knew that John Fenton, for all the gray hairs and deep lines which were revealed by the merciless morning sunshine, held youth with a grasp far stronger than her own. He had the elastic strength and fine texture that age slowly and appear to gain rather than lose by the mellowing process. Norma glanced from him to her figureless husband and back again, with a faint stir of discontent.

Lake and sky were two vast depths of blue, perfectly matched in color even to the cloud-flecks above and the foam-flecks below, and set off from each other by an irregular wooded shore-line fringed with tiny islets — a bewildering shore that advanced and retreated in its countless indentations until all sense of direction was lost to the beholder. At some angles of refraction the water seemed fathomless, yet where a sudden shaft of sunlight pierced the heaving, crystalline mass, it sent back a flash of clean white pebbles from the bottom. Scores of boats were abroad on the ruffled blue — launches like Hirschmann's, yachts with gleaming sails, double-decked express-boats ploughing deep furrows under full head of steam. There was wind enough to make lively work for the smaller craft; the banker's launch, a notably swift traveller, danced like a cockle-shell as it sped across the curling waves. The children were in the stern, each busy with the fifty feet of trolling-line and painted tin fly without which they never stirred from shore. They trolled for bass regardless of wind, weather, or the speed of "father's"

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launch. Once, Edith had captured a sunfish; Monty had never yet caught anything, but the trolling-line was as indispensable to his trips across the lake as if his daily sustenance had depended upon his daily fishing.

"So you had it ninety-seven in Chicago," said Hirschmann, over his shoulder. "Well, there has been nothing to match that here. I suppose you have read accounts of the destructive hail-storms all through the Northwest?"

"Yes. Rothney has escaped thus far, I believe, but I am rather anxious to get back and see how the country looks."

"What agencies does the R. L. & I. carry, in hail and tornado insurance?" inquired Hirschmann. He was a business man solely, who talked nothing but business with other men; he and Fenton discussed insurance all the way across the bay, while Edith and Monty quarrelled over their trolling and Norma posed statuesquely with her big pansy-brown eyes fixed upon the elusive shore-line.

"You find us all by ourselves to-day, John," said Norma, as she stepped from the launch to the landing at the foot of her own terraced lawn. "It is the first time this Summer that we have not had a week-end — is n't it, Joe?"

"I believe it is, my dear," replied Hirschmann.

"That adds to my good fortune in being here to-day," said Fenton.

In recent years Fenton had had few opportunities to see Norma set like a single gem in her own home —

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ordinarily she was surrounded by guests — and he thought she appeared to especially good advantage to-day. With deepening respect he watched her as she gently soothed the clamor of the children who pressed her with their teasing demands and their demonstrations of affection. Recalling the time when these same children, odd, ill-balanced and high-strung — logical fruit of an incompatible union — had been babes in the nursery, while Norma, mated to a man she despised, had been beating the bars of her prison, he asked himself whether his own somewhat dramatic devotion to the woman had not been, after all, as selfish as it was dangerous. His heart swelled with shame for himself and pity for her. It might have been better for her if she had never sought his counsel nor leaned upon his sympathy in that parlous time — perhaps better if she had never seen him. It was well for Fenton's peace of mind that he did not know Norma's whole heart, did not dream that he stood outside the placidity of her life with Hirschmann, as he had previously stood outside the turmoil of her life with Bennington,— a personification of what "might have been."

He listened to the piano, played softly by Norma in the drawing-room while he sat talking with Joe in the library. He watched the children climbing about his host's easy-chair, and Hirschmann putting an arm around each of the restless little creatures and talking uninterruptedly across their bobbing heads. And all the while he was keenly conscious of another personality, invisible, but absolutely real — the divorced husband,

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Willard Bennington. Bennington's appearance in the flesh at that moment would have made matters difficult, if not impossible, for all concerned; yet so long as he continued to live and move and have his being in the world, was he not morally and spiritually ever-present? The tragical absurdity of the situation impressed Fenton as never before — he marvelled that he had taken it so much for granted all these years; and he lost several sentences of sound financial wisdom from Joe, who was discoursing on the causes of the recent flurry in the Chicago market, because his own mind was so absorbed by the network of fallacy that had enmeshed them both with that third man, that unhappy woman in the next room, and these helpless children.

From the moment of his arrival he had suspected that the regular week-end entertainment had been set aside for some special reason. He had seen Norma's anxious abstraction, and had read in Joe's exuberant cheerfulness a definite attempt to preserve appearances. Late in the afternoon, when he and Norma were alone in the drawing-room, the woman spoke.

"John," she said, breaking a short, overcharged silence, "I am in great trouble."

"I thought so," he answered quietly. "What is it, Norma?"

"Bennington was here yesterday. He threatens to sue for custody of the children."

Fenton's lips took their significant downward twitch, and a line appeared between his brows. "That 's bad,"

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he said. "Your decree was not absolute in regard to that point."

"No. He has the law on his side so far as Monty is concerned. He could take Monty, but — Oh, it would be better to take them both than to separate them! John, he is a fiend — a monster! He sees how happy the children are with Joe, and how good Joe is to them, and he is determined to poison their happiness!"

"They are Bennington's children," said Fenton, slowly.

She caught her red lip under her white teeth, and breathed hard with a lift of her beautiful shoulders. "Yes, that's the curse of it!" she muttered, "the curse of it!"

"What action have you taken?" Fenton asked.

She flung her jewelled hands apart. "Oh," she sighed, "I had a long discussion with Bennington. It ended in the usual way — we lost our tempers. It accomplished nothing."

"You 'd better put it in the hands of your lawyer."

"Joe says not. He thinks the only way to keep the children is by making some settlement out of court. He has been to Bennington himself and offered him money, a large amount, but he would n't take it. John!" She turned suddenly upon Fenton. "Won't *you* talk to Bennington? You could bring him around if any one could. He likes you, and he hates Joe. He always liked you, even when —" She stopped, a flood of color sweeping over her pale face. Fenton flushed, too, though his eyes did not waver.

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"It would only complicate matters for me to come into the game at this stage," he said, decidedly. "I'll be glad to talk it over with Joe, if I can help him in any way, but I have nothing to say to Willard Bennington."

"Then let the law take its course!" she exclaimed with a gesture of mingled anger and despair. "There is nothing to be done. I didn't suppose you would fail me, John, or I should never have asked—"

"I have not failed you, Norma. I am not the one to act—that's all. Trust it to your husband. He will know what is best."

When the time came for Fenton's return to Minneapolis the wind had risen to a gale and the lake was in a lashing fury. Hirschmann drove his guest around to the station instead of attempting to cross the bay in the launch. While waiting for the car to be brought up from the garage, Fenton had another moment alone with Norma, who chatted gayly now on indifferent topics, striving to efface from his mind the appeal which she so bitterly regretted having made. They stood beside the library table, on which lay a deep drift of magazines and newspapers—the accumulation of Joe's Sunday morning reading. She took up a small dove-colored volume and turned its title toward Fenton. "Have you read this?" she asked, carelessly.

His serious face lighted up. The book was "Ardietta," by Sarah Gray, and somehow it reminded him that in a few hours he should be back in Rothney, and that before to-morrow ended he should again see Alice

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Delamere. He felt as if he had been away from Rothney a long time. "No, I haven't read it," he replied. "Have you?"

"Months ago, when it first came out. Joe has just finished it, I think."

"Is it good?"

"It is different from most books. Yes, it is good. It made me cry. Just fancy! *Me!* You'll admit that if a book can do that, it must be something extraordinary. It made me deliciously miserable — ashamed of myself, and ashamed of all the petty shams that I live in and live upon. It made me long to go back to the beginning of things — it made me long to be young again — young!" She broke off with a shrug and a forced little laugh. "I was quite disenchanted this morning," she went on in a different tone, "when I read in the *Journal* that the story is the work of a New York magazine editor and reviewer. I always supposed those reviewers were the most case-hardened writers in the whole field of literature."

"Sarah Gray? What magazine is she connected with?"

"It appears that Sarah Gray is not her real name." Norma turned over the scattered sections of the *Journal* and handed the literary supplement to Fenton, whose eye took in at a glance the meaning of the little write-up that Alice Delamere's publisher had sent to all the leading Sunday papers in the land. He read it twice — three times — without comment. Norma, desiring only to kill time until the automobile arrived at the door, left

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him to his silent perusal of the paragraph while she attentively collected the remaining sections of the *Journal* and folded each one into an exact rectangle.

The automobile rolled weightily under the *portecochère*. "Ready, John?" called the cheery voice of the husband.

"All ready, Joe." Fenton threw down the newspaper and took up "Ardietta." "May I borrow this?" he asked quickly. "I'd like to read it this evening on the train. I'll return it in a few days."

"Keep it forever if you wish. I never read a book twice."

"Now I call that unkind," declared Fenton, taking her hand in his, "when I am trying to make the return of your property a plausible pretext for coming again soon."

"As if you ever dealt in 'plausible pretexts!'" she retorted scornfully.

He caught up his hat with a laugh and went out. On the way to the station Hirschmann made no reference to Willard Bennington's threatened suit. Probably he, too, thought it wiser for Fenton to keep out of the game.

CHAPTER X

WHAT CAME BY THE MORNING MAIL

BEFORE he slept that night Fenton had read all of "Ardietta" once, and several of the scenes twice. Though the story contained nothing that paralleled his own personal experience it somehow struck a note that set his whole soul in sympathetic vibration. He came back to the office of the R. L. & I., next morning, with renewed faith in himself and his fellow-man, with a sharpened sense of "things worth while."

Buoyantly he attacked the pile of letters that had accumulated in his absence, dictating replies to Dick Harvey, who sat with his stenographer's pad on the pull-out of the desk. Dick was little more than half Fenton's age, yet as he sat there, pale and attentive, tracing lightning-strokes on the pad, he seemed less youthful in spirit than his employer. Half-way down the pile of letters Dick's activity was momentarily checked, while Fenton's soaring mood was rudely caught back to earth. Frowning, the general manager picked up the little envelope of cheap tinted note-paper that had come to the top; it was postmarked "Melburn" with the large, leisurely distinctness of the third-class rural office, and it was addressed in an erratic feminine scrawl. After looking at it for a moment

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as if tempted to tear it up, Fenton thrust it unopened into his pocket, and slitting the envelope of the next communication on the pile he resumed his dictation. When Dick had withdrawn with his notes Fenton took the letter from his pocket and read:

"Dear Mr. Fenton:

"I can't stand it any longer here and I'm going to quit. It's no use — I just *can't* marry Barney. Everybody in Melburn treats me mean, and Barney's mother is the worst of the lot. Why should I stand it? I'm only eighteen and I want to have a good time. Ed Kenney was in Melburn yesterday. He came to see me at the dressmaker's place where I'm working, and took me out to get an ice-cream soda. He offered me a job as telephone girl at the Hotel K. I took it, and I'm going down to Rothney this evening on Number Eight. Nobody here knows I'm going. Won't there be a circus when they find I've left? I expect you'll say I'm all in the wrong, but I can't help it.

"Gratefully your little good-for-nothing

"FLORENCE."

Fenton's expression darkened as he scanned these lines. He leaned back in his desk-chair and looked through the window toward the Hotel Kenney, which flaunted its striped awnings and clipped bay-trees on the diagonal corner. Telephone girl in this commercial hotel with its loud, free tone and its constant ebb and flow of transient patronage! — could Florence be wholly ignorant of the associations by which she would be surrounded in such a place? The private exchange of the hotel was a small system the care of which would have been a sinecure if it had been better paid; the operator's little booth was in the general office, between the registry desk and the cigar-counter, and in

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the occasional absences of "Billy" Hunter, the clerk, the telephone girl took charge of his duties as well as her own. Fenton thought it only too probable that Ed Kenney had gone to Melburn for the express purpose of offering the job to Florence Conley. Kenney was a widower, with a half-grown son and daughter who were attending Roman Catholic schools in Canada. In the absence of the young people the mayor of Rothney led an untrammelled bachelor existence.

After looking once more at the postmark on Florence's note — the date of which showed that it had been lying on his desk since the day he left for Chicago — Fenton tore the missive into small fragments. He should not reply to it, of course — it was an impertinence for her to send him such a message — yet he had an uncomfortable conviction that Florence would come in person for a reply if he did not write to her. Passing the hotel on his way to luncheon he glanced briefly through the broad window of the office and saw Florence at the cigar-counter, laughing and talking with Billy Hunter.

The two o'clock mail from the north brought Fenton a letter the perusal of which left his brow even more clouded than it had been after reading Florence Conley's note. The letter was from a lawyer in Northbury, and it informed Fenton, with many circumlocutions of complimentary phraseology, that it had become the painful duty of Mr. John Johnson, proprietor of the Northbury garage, to garnish the salary of Richard M. Harvey, clerk in the employ of the Rothney Land &

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Investment Company, to recover forty-five dollars owed to said Johnson for the use of a certain five-passenger touring-car hired by said Richard M. Harvey on sundry occasions, and that the said Johnson had decided upon this means of protecting his claim after learning that Mr. Harvey owed several small bills that were apparently non-collectable. No action would be begun, however, without Mr. Fenton's full concurrence. For a moment Fenton was taken too completely by surprise to do more than mechanically re-read the letter. He had trusted Dick with a confidence and personal friendship beyond that vouchsafed to any one else in his employ, and had felt for him the respect which only an experienced man can feel for the youth who is facing the world with a man's burden on his shoulders. Dick was the eldest of five children and his mother was a widow; he had left the public school at the seventh grade to enter a commercial college; he had worked after hours, running errands, carrying newspapers, shovelling snow, and mowing lawns, ever since he was ten years old. Fenton had taken him direct from his commercial course in St. Paul and had made a special protégé of him; and now, to find the lad in debt forty-five dollars for a touring-car, to say nothing of the other liabilities! Fenton touched the buzzer on his desk. "Westcott, tell Dick to step here," he said to the clerk who appeared at the open door.

Westcott obeyed, feeling like a sheriff armed with a warrant. For several days he had suspected that his fellow-clerk was in trouble, but Dick had not confided

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in him. "J. F. wants to see *you*, Dick," he said with inadvertent emphasis, his eyes rounded in solemn commiseration. Young Harvey straightened with a start, paling slightly, and looking past Westcott with a quick blink of his bright blue eyes. Taking his little sack coat from its nail behind the door, he put it on with a resolute jerk and marched into Fenton's office.

"Shut the door, Dick," said Fenton without looking up from the memorandum he was noting on the stub of his desk calendar.

Dick's heart plunged downward into space. He closed the door, which creaked complainingly on its hinges as it swung out from its accustomed position against the wall.

"I understand that you've been running into debt lately," said Fenton, swinging around in his chair and facing the youth. "Sit down and tell me all about it."

"I — I do owe a few small bills."

"Begin with the largest item. How much is it, and to whom is it owed?"

"Fifty dollars to my tailor."

"What for?"

"A dress suit."

"Hm! And who is your tailor?"

Dick hesitated, and then reluctantly named one of the most expensive and exclusive tailors in Minneapolis.

"Hm. The next item?"

"Thirty dollars I — I borrowed last May."

"Who from?"

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"Samson & Abrams, St. Paul."

"Ah! Ten per cent brokers. I see. Have you paid any part of the loan?"

"I've paid the interest each month, and ten dollars on the principal. The note was for forty dollars."

"How did you use the money?"

"Paid fifteen to the tailor, fifteen on — on a livery-bill, and used the rest for incidentals."

"Did you know what you were getting into when you gave your note to Samson & Abrams?"

"No, Mr. Fenton, I did not," said Dick, with sudden spirit. "I was swindled."

"That's about the size of it, my boy. It is an expensive way to do business, and I am surprised that a fellow with your commercial training should be so easily taken in."

"I know. I ought to have had more sense. I needed the money in a hurry and I did n't see where else to get it."

"What can you tell me about *this* matter?" Fenton pushed the lawyer's letter across the desk. Dick read it rapidly, a look of consternation, followed by anger, flashing over his face.

"Garnish my salary, will they!" he exclaimed hotly. "Well, I call that the limit! Mr. Fenton, they've no right to do anything of the kind. This debt is Neill Galvin's as much as mine. We had the car together; sometimes he ordered it and was charged for it, and sometimes I did. We paid it, turn about, but Neill has n't settled for the last few times we had the

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car, and I've been waiting for him to come across before I paid my share. I told Mr. Johnson the circumstances and asked him to make out two separate bills, but he said he couldn't do that. Neill promised me that he'd sure attend to it this week — said he was going to strike the old man for it right away."

"Possibly it's the old man who has struck this time." Fenton's displeasure had not abated at the mention of Neill Galvin — a notorious would-be gilded youth, the son of a prominent Northbury citizen. "When did you take these motor trips? This is the first I've heard of them."

"Generally on the Saturday half-holiday, sometimes on Sundays. We drove to Grantham several times and had dinner at the Hotel Dacotah."

"Just you and Neill?"

"Y—yes. That is, twice we took a couple of girls."

"Northbury girls?"

"Yes, sir. Friends of Neill's." Dick raised his eyes slowly from the floor to encounter the most searching look that his employer had ever bestowed upon him. "It was all right, Mr. Fenton," he said, bravely, flushing to the roots of his thick brown hair. "They were nice girls."

"I am very glad to hear it, Harvey."

When J. F. addressed his clerk as "Harvey," it meant that for the moment he admitted the youth to a certain equality with himself as man and man. Dick took courage from the sign, his cheeks still pink, his blue eyes looking frankly into Fenton's.

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"Well, Mr. Fenton, do I get my time-check for this business?" he asked.

"I think not. We'll see." Fenton swung back in his chair, throwing a well-shod foot across his knee, and reflected carefully. "You must put your affairs into my hands for settlement. I can adjust them better than you can. These St. Paul loan sharks will sell me your note for ten dollars cash and be glad of the chance. Your tailor must be paid at once, and I will see Neill Galvin's father about the garage account. By the way, have you kept up your regular monthly remittances to your mother?"

"Yes, Mr. Fenton, I have," returned the boy, proudly and emphatically. "If I had n't I might have kept straight on some of these other things," he added. "But I thought there was no use in mother being in a hole just because *I* was."

Fenton's gravity relaxed for the first time since the beginning of the interview. "My dear boy," he said after the smile had passed, "your mother will be in a hole very soon if you continue your present extravagance. Now, my proposition is this. I will pay all your debts immediately. Be sure to give me a complete list of the items, large and small. You can pay me ten dollars per month on the entire amount, with interest at six per cent, your salary to go on just as usual. Is this satisfactory?"

"Yes, Mr. Fenton. It's very good of you —"

"Not at all. I am laying no obligation upon you. I'm not going to pull you out of the scrape you've

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got yourself into — I'm merely going to help you to pull yourself out. You see the distinction? You will eventually pay every penny of the indebtedness you have incurred, with a legal rate of interest. Your income will be shaved pretty close for the next six months; you won't have any leisure time or leisure cash to spend in auto drives to Grantham or dinners at the Hotel Dacotah."

"Oh, I've cut that out entirely, Mr. Fenton,—I have indeed. It's been more trouble than it was worth. I'm through with Neill Galvin, too; he's acted so shabby about this business that I've no use for him any more."

"You can do without him."

"I should say. He's had it in for me ever since the Fourth of July, because," Dick paused an instant, with a sparkle of mischief in his eyes; he was young, and already his spirits had begun to rebound, "because the girl he invited that day spent nearly all her time talking to me."

The boyish conceit of the speech was irresistible; once more Fenton smiled. "This experience may prove to be worth all it has cost," he said after a moment. "For one thing, you have probably learned that a girl who will go for half-day auto rides and hotel dinners with two young cubs like you and Galvin is not the type of girl that you can afford to spend much time on, however innocent she may be in fact. Galvin knows perfectly well—and you ought to know—that it's no compliment to offer a girl an outing of that kind. I

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believe this is all I have to say to you this afternoon, Dick."

Dick arose. "Mr. Fenton, I can't tell you how much I appreciate your kindness," he said earnestly. "If you'd given me my time it would be nearer what's coming to me."

"Oh, I don't know about that." Fenton looked up at the boy, still quietly smiling. "I guess you'll do for a while yet."

As Dick walked briskly across the main office he met Westcott's round eyes, which were devouring him with inquiry. He halted beside his friend's desk and remarked in a tone of subdued enthusiasm, "I tell you what, West, J. F. is white, clear through!"

"What's up? — what's he been doing?" asked Westcott, eagerly.

Dick pushed back his thick brown hair with his accustomed jaunty grace. "I'll give you the whole story some day," he replied, laughing.

CHAPTER XI

A GIRL'S APPEAL AND A POLITICAL PROPOSITION

A TELEPHONE message from Loudon Allingham sent Fenton back to his office after dinner that evening. "I am dining at the hotel with Mr. Kenney," said Mr. Allingham. "I arrived from Burnside on Number Six, and shall go on to Minneapolis on Number Eight. Mr. Kenney and I have a small matter of business which we wish to place before you, if you can conveniently meet us at the office by half-past seven." It was ten minutes past seven when Fenton entered the office and turned on the green-shaded electric lamp above his desk; a trifle impatient at the check that Mr. Allingham's unexpected arrival had placed upon his own plans, yet reflecting that there would still be time to ride out to Willow Branch after the departure of Number Eight, he threw open his desk and sat down. Scarcely had he done so when he heard the swing of the street door and the patter of light steps in the corridor. He gave a dismayed glance at his watch. "Why under heaven has she chosen this time to come?" he thought. "Well — I shall have to cut short the interview." His hand was returning the watch to his pocket, and his eye was upon the open doorway, when Florence Conley appeared. He arose and bowed

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with the instinctive courtesy that he showed toward all women.

Florence breathed quickly, as if she had been running; her brilliant beryl eyes perused Fenton's face in one rapid, sweeping look as she stepped into the room. She was a tall girl, fully rounded and richly tinted; her bright bronze hair was elaborately dressed, and she wore no hat; her short-sleeved lingerie blouse slightly veiled, but by no means concealed, the beauty of her neck and arms, and her sheath-like skirt was short enough to display exquisite feet and ankles in small low shoes and openwork silk stockings. Her manner mingled self-assurance and timidity, appeal and challenge, in about equal proportions.

"I—I ran across from the hotel when I saw you come in," she said nervously. "I thought maybe I'd find you alone."

"Sit down, Miss Conley," said Fenton. "I have an engagement at seven-thirty, but in the meantime I am at your service."

He resumed his chair while Florence seated herself opposite. Her color rose resentfully under the cool, business-like tone of his address. Catching at a long bead chain that hung from her neck, she wound it about her white, dimpled fingers with a vague, purposeless air of suspense.

"I found your note when I got back from Chicago this morning," he said, after waiting a reasonable interval for her to speak. "I am sorry that you have broken with Barney, and still more sorry that you have

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taken this job at the Hotel Kenney. You have made a serious mistake."

"I expected you 'd say so, Mr. Fenton."

"Has Barney done anything to offend you? Has he —"

"Don't speak to me of him!" she cried vehemently.

"He's a stupid little lout, and I hate him."

"He is an honest, steady fellow. You must have cared for him when you promised to marry him."

"No, I did n't! I never wanted to marry him. I'd never have promised if it had n't been for you. You made me do it."

"Made you do it!" repeated Fenton slowly; then he shut his lips in a hard, straight line and silently looked at her.

"Oh, you know well enough how it was!" she panted, pulling her hand from the twisted bead chain and throwing it out with a violent gesture. "You wanted to get rid of me. You thought if I married Barney I'd not trouble you any more —"

"Stop! This is the wildest nonsense. I never urged your marriage. I recollect that once, last Winter, I spoke to you about the way you were playing fast and loose with Barney, and told you that I thought you ought to give him a final answer one way or the other. When you decided to take him, I supposed you were acting on your own best judgment. All I wanted was to see fair play. I have tried to help you, Florence. I have tried to take Dan's place as far as I could."

The sentences were spoken carefully, with brief

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pauses between, and with the last one Fenton's tone sounded less stern than in the beginning. Though the effect produced by her reproaches was not quite what Florence desired, at least it indicated that she had some power to move him, and her volatile imagination made the most of the inference.

"Forgive me," she whispered. She clasped her hands and held them out toward him. "You see, I've got the same old bad temper. I don't mean to be ungrateful for all you've done for me — and all you did for Dan. I know you're the best friend — the only friend — I've got in the world, and that's why I've come to you now —" She lowered her clasped hands until they rested on the corner of his desk; she looked down at the floor, turning her face just enough to throw her profile into relief against the shadow of the room. A moment went by in silence. Florence sat very still, fully aware that she was a beautiful thing to look upon and that John Fenton was steadily regarding her. When she presently heard him pick up and throw down some small object that lay near his hand on the desk, she knew that the spell had worked.

"I don't see what I can do, Florence," he said in a troubled tone. "You have broken with Barney and placed yourself in a false position with every one else by coming here to the Hotel Kenney. If you haven't friends it must be your own fault. Surely there are plenty of good women who would gladly befriend you if you gave them a chance."

She smiled caustically. "That's all you know about

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it, Mr. Fenton," she said. "There is n't a woman in Melburn but will cross the street to avoid speaking to me."

"Oh, that can't be possible! You have done nothing to deserve such unkindness."

"Well, I've left it all behind me, anyway. I don't care what they think of me now. All I want is to be happy, and I've made up my mind to be happy, no matter what it costs."

Fenton's reply came less promptly than his last words, and with another change of inflection. "I fear I cannot advise you, Florence," he said coldly.

"There are other people ready enough to advise me!" she flashed. "Yesterday Ed Kenney asked me to take a trip to the coast with him. Maybe I'll decide to go."

Fenton's old swivel-chair creaked heavily as he squared back in it and looked at Florence. She winced under the look, then tossed her head, forcing a laugh.

"I suppose you know what that means, Florence."

"It means that I'll be treated like a lady, and not scolded as if I was a child!" she cried, her bosom heaving. "Ed Kenney is a gentleman, and he knows how a lady ought to be treated."

"A 'gentleman'!" Fenton's flinty expression gave off a spark of contempt. "He can be very plausible when he tries. He can offer degradation to a girl as if he were offering homage to a queen. But — did you ever happen to see him drunk? Wait until you see him drunk; wait until you have placed yourself in his power, and then say whether he is a 'gentleman'! Oh,

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Florence! You are worse than a child! You are old enough to know what you are doing; haven't you enough woman's pride to save yourself? I can't talk to you about it—I don't know what to say. But this much I *will* say —” he brought his clenched hand down on the desk, “if you go out to the coast with Ed Kenney, I shall feel that I am forever quit of the promise I made your brother when he died. If you go with Ed Kenney, don't you ever dare come near *me* again!”

He sprang up and began to pace the room. Florence, watching him, gave her own interpretation to his anger.

“Well, please don't fly into a rage,” she said with a little hysterical laugh. “I don't have to go with him. I did n't tell him I would — I ran out of the room while he was talking about it. If you want me to shake him, I will. I'll do anything you ask me to — *anything* — if you'll only be kind to me.”

Fenton looked toward her without pausing in his walk across the room. Her color deepened at his glance; she rushed on, now utterly reckless of consequences, “Do you mind the night of the big fire last November? Do you mind carrying me down that long flight of stairs, through the thick, black smoke? Ah, yes, you do! One place we came to a door where the wall was blazing each side. You stopped a minute to pull off your coat and wrap it around my head so the flame would n't get to my face, and then you took me up again and rushed through the door, and there was

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fire all around us. You thought I was in a faint, but I was n't. I knew all about it. Well! *That* was when I began to hate Barney Flynn."

Fenton stopped short in the middle of the room. His eyes sought the floor in sheer shame and pity for the girl's mad avowal.

"Oh, I know what you're thinking!" she cried wildly. "You're thinking what a precious fool I am. You never knew what I suffered while you were urging me to 'play fair' with Barney. I never supposed you'd think of such a thing as marrying me yourself, but I did n't care then and I don't care now —" With a swift, lithe movement she arose from her chair and came to Fenton's side. She caught his right hand in hers and gently stroked a slight red scar on his wrist. "It's not a very big scar," she murmured. "Most people would n't notice it, but *I* know what it means. It was a burn, and you got it that night while you were carrying me down through the smoke. Ah!" She clasped the hand tightly in both her own, first holding it against her velvety cheek and then pressing it close to the soft, throbbing curve of her bosom.

It was a moment to stir a man's being, if not to its depths, certainly to its dregs. The devil in Fenton's blood thrilled a response to the naively shameless passion of this beautiful creature who offered herself to him — this palpitating creature of rosy youth and soft white flesh and "scarlet fiery innocence," who would be his for the taking. She felt him tremble and she saw the dark red that flushed to his eyes and brow; she

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drew closer, lifting her face to his. "Ah, sure you're not angry with me for speaking?" she breathed. "Say you're not angry with me."

Slowly his head bowed toward her uplifted face until his breath mingled with hers. A moment passed, while Florence confidently awaited his kiss and Fenton blindly fought the temptation that sheathed him like a flame. Then he unlocked her clinging hands, and taking her by both wrists he put her back at arm's length, held her so an instant and released her. It was all very gently and deliberately done; the flush had left his brow, and in its place there was a glisten of dampness such as follows some tremendous physical exertion. Florence stared at him, wide-eyed, breathless.

"What do you mean?" she panted.

"Florence, you don't realize what you have been saying," he said in a low voice. "You are overwrought. You must go away from here at once. The men I am expecting may arrive any moment, and it will never do for them to find you here."

Even as he spoke the clang of the street door echoed through the silent building. Two voices became audible in the corridor — the polished accents of Loudon Allingham and the coarser tones of the Honorable Edward Kenney. Fenton gave a desperate glance about the room; there was but one exit, the door which stood open into the main office, which in turn opened into the corridor. "There's no help for it, Florence," he said hastily. "You have brought this upon yourself."

Her beryl eyes gleamed with a peculiar smile. She

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stood her ground defiantly, with head thrown back and hands clasped behind her. Fenton read her thought — the thought that at any rate he must be the sharer of the compromising situation which she had brought upon herself.

“From the standpoint of fundamental law,” Mr. Allingham was saying, just outside the door, “the rights of the corporation are safe enough; but the passage of recent mischievous amendments will make it extremely difficult to secure —” The speech ended in a murmur; the speaker wavered on the threshold.

As Kenney pushed past him into the room, he caught sight of Florence. Advancing with a lurch he laid a heavy hand on her shoulder. “What’s the meaning of this?” he demanded roughly. “What the devil are you doing here?” He was not quite himself — that is, he was the self that sometimes emerged from his private smoking-room after dinner, an alcoholic flavor mingling with the fumes of his strong, black cigar.

Fenton took a quick stride forward, but before he could interfere Florence freed herself from Kenney’s hold and darted toward the door, Mr. Allingham politely stepping aside to let her pass. Burning with sudden shame under the twofold insult of Edward Kenney’s broad stare and Loudon Allingham’s narrow smile, the girl rushed from the room. Fenton followed her, saying as he did so, “Sit down, Mr. Allingham. I will return directly.”

Kenney lunged across the room, only to find Mr. Allingham once more in the doorway. The slender figure

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of the millionaire seemed to approach and retreat before the mayor's eyes, swept on a moving floor that rose and sank like an ocean swell. Though raging with primal impulse that made him for a moment more beast than man, Kenney nevertheless paused, his reddened eye held by the calm, blinking gaze of the man who barred the way; then he turned with an oath and dropped heavily into the nearest chair. Mr. Allingham thereupon quitted his station in the doorway and seated himself with his usual formal precision, laying his hat and gloves on the corner of the open desk.

Fenton overtook Florence at the street door. "I can't let you go like this," he said, putting his hand on the knob of the door as she reached towards it. "Give me some assurance that you forgive me. God knows I never meant to harm you, even in thought."

"Oh — let me go!" she sobbed.

"Not until you say that you forgive me."

"No, no! I can't! I never can forget —"

"Promise that you will drop Ed Kenney."

"I'll promise nothing! Let me go!"

"Florence, if you won't give up this wretched folly for your own sake, try to think of your poor old brother Dan, and do it for his memory."

With a choking cry she wrenched the door-knob from his grasp, flung the door back against him, and ran out into the street.

As Fenton re-entered his office Mr. Allingham was completing a low-toned caution to Kenney, who sat pulling furiously at his cigar. Evidently Kenney had

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heeded the words; he neither addressed Fenton nor looked at him as the latter seated himself at the desk.

"Well, Mr. Allingham?" said Fenton, ignoring the mayor as completely as that gentleman had ignored him.

"Mr. Kenney and I have come on a little political business, John," said Mr. Allingham, blandly. "We dined with Colonel Nick Hartshorne at Marriot on Saturday. As you doubtless know, the Colonel is about starting for Panama and will be gone three months or more. The campaign will not be regularly inaugurated until his return, but in the meantime a little preliminary skirmishing must be done, and he is picking the men to do the work. He has appointed Mr. Kenney a member of the State committee, and has asked me to confer with the committee from time to time as my other engagements permit. He had hoped to see you in person before he left, but owing to your absence in Chicago this was impossible, so Mr. Kenney and I are here to speak for him."

Fenton inclined his head in acknowledgement of Mr. Allingham's exordium, drawing his own rapid conclusions therefrom.

"Your recent speech at the Rainsford Commercial Club," Mr. Allingham went on, "has aroused much interest among the party leaders. It has been quoted by the newspapers all over the Northwest —"

"Occasionally misquoted," observed Fenton.

"I daresay. We are all liable to misquotation. But the general impression produced by the speech has

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been extremely favorable. The Colonel himself seems deeply impressed by your large grasp of the present political situation, your eloquence, and your sane conservatism. 'John Fenton,' said the Colonel on Saturday, 'is too good a politician and too smart a man to be wasting his strength on a losing cause. He belongs with the staunch Old Guard, and that's where we've got to have him.' I believe I am repeating the Colonel's exact words, Mr. Kenney?"

The mayor assented with a curt nod. He had been warned by Mr. Allingham to be content with a purely passive and complimentary share in the present discussion.

"Briefly, John, Colonel Hartshorne's proposition is this: he wants you to take charge of the county campaign. He is more concerned about the outcome in Rothney than ever before. Up to now it has been loyal Republican territory, but since the inroads that have been made by insurgent disaffection, there is grave danger of Democratic majorities in every precinct."

"I don't anticipate any such cataclysm," smiled Fenton. "Rothney may cast a strong progressive vote this year, but it is a long way from Democratic victory."

"The progressive vote," rejoined Mr. Allingham, "will be merely a subtraction from the total Republican power. The insurgents cannot elect a single important candidate; all they can accomplish is to cripple the party, and lead its candidates to defeat. Their pernicious activities began in the petty wrangles of a few

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disgruntled office-seekers; this fact is well known by all who are correctly informed, and even the ignorant masses, heretofore carried away by the empty bombast of the insurgent leaders, are coming to their senses now. Never before has it been so necessary that every man should cast his vote for an integral party. It is the manifest duty of men like yourself, John, who are prominent and popular in the community, to throw all the weight of their example and influence on the side of party organization and to be fearless in rebuking the wanton disintegration of party interests."

Mr. Allingham's language was that of the stump orator, but his smooth, graceful delivery would have suited the recitation of a lyric poem. He paused, balancing his eye-glass on his forefinger and bending his dim glance benignly upon Fenton. "This duty, John," he said, "is the one that Colonel Hartshorne wishes you to assume on behalf of the Republican party in Penfield County."

Fenton returned his look in full before replying. "In other words," he said, "Hartshorne wishes me to steal the county delegation to the State convention. Well, I can tell him right now that the thing could n't be done. The insurgents are too strong. Still, it's very handsome of the Colonel to offer me the job — in view of the consistent opposition that I have put up against him the past two years."

"Oh, the Colonel is much too broad a man to be affected by any minor differences between his policy and yours. He does full justice to the honesty of your

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convictions, and bears you no grudge. As he said on Saturday, 'Fenton is a thoroughly square man, and we want square men on our side, the more the better.'

"That is a well-known principle of his. He always gets the best men who are controllable to operate his machine."

Mr. Allingham hooked his eye-glass across his thin-bridged nose, looked at his watch, and resumed with a slight acceleration of manner, "The State convention is the first consideration in point of time, but the senatorial contest will be the crux of the campaign. On this issue the party *must* unite. The election of United States senator cannot be trusted to raw recruits without funds, organization, or generalship. Hartshorne thinks that a part of the State ticket may be safely conceded to the insurgents, but in regard to senator and representatives no concessions are possible."

"None are possible for Hartshorne, that's sure. He's pledged. The deal was made two years ago."

"In addition to taking command of the Republican forces in Penfield County, the Colonel suggests that you make an early speaking tour in Wårdner and Walling Counties. Conditions in that section are somewhat problematical. The country has been rapidly filling up with new settlers who are fresh from the oppression of alleged 'gang-rule' in other States, and ready to bolt at the mere mention of the word 'machine.' They are intelligent men, but ignorant of the real issues. They must be set right at the start, and convinced by reasonable argument."

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"Naturally, Hartshorne finds them a different proposition from the Russians of Sutler County," said Fenton, dryly. "They can't be rounded up like cattle and herded to the polls."

"Certainly not. The appeal must be made to their native American common sense. And it seems to Colonel Hartshorne — Mr. Kenney and I fully agree with him — that you, of all men, are the one best fitted to carry the Republican gospel to the voters of these western counties."

Fenton directed a quick look toward Mr. Allingham's mute associate. Kenney sat with his gaze turned somewhat pointedly from his companions, his flushed face half obscured by the smoke of his cigar; he seemed like a man in bonds, waiting a chance to spring upon his captors.

"I should have thought," said Fenton, after a short pause, "that Colonel Hartshorne's choice of a lieutenant would fall more logically upon Mayor Kenney."

Mr. Allingham also glanced at Kenney, but with a different kind of speculation from that in Fenton's look. He had witnessed the battle in Marriot, last Saturday, by which "Boss" Hartshorne's henchman had been forced to surrender to the great man's will. He had seen the red fire of jealous rage burning in Kenney's eye as the all-powerful Colonel coldly decreed that John Fenton's personal popularity should be made an asset of the stalwart campaign — that envied popularity which the mayor of Rothney prized so far above its

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value and vainly strove to win for himself from his lukewarm constituency.

"Assuredly Mr. Kenney could acquit himself well on the rostrum," said Mr. Allingham, "but there are other ways in which he can serve his party even better. He has always been a warm adherent and personal friend of Colonel Hartshorne, and as such is a target, no less than the Colonel himself, for the opposition of certain insurgents whose only reason for breaking with the regulars lies in the fact that they did not receive as many favors as they thought they had earned. You are under no such disadvantage, John. You have never been aligned with the Hartshorne organization, and now that the time has come for sweeping away factions and establishing a true Republican solidarity, you are one of the few men who can take the lead with prestige. The Colonel foresees that you will be a strong vote-getter with both regulars and progressives; if you agree to get into line at once and work for the straight Republican ticket from now on, he on his part agrees to seat you in the next legislative assembly and to land you in Congress two years later. So there you have the proposition in a nutshell, and it is one which you cannot afford to refuse. Nick Hartshorne never fails to land his man, and he never breaks an agreement; if he pledges himself to land you in Congress at a specified time, in Congress you will be, according to specification."

Fenton's expression was inscrutable as he swung back

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in his chair and considered this concrete ending of Mr. Allingham's abstract argument. His feeling was divided between indignation at the bald bribery of Hartshorne's offer and elation at the tribute to his own power which was conveyed by bribery on so large a scale.

"Think well of it, John," advised Mr. Allingham, kindly. He reached for his hat and gloves and made a movement to rise, well satisfied with the manner in which he had thus far executed the Colonel's mission.

"One moment," said Fenton. "Hartshorne must feel mighty sure of me, or he would n't dare make this proposition."

"He feels sure that you are a sufficiently loyal Republican to work for party harmony."

"Unquestionably I am a Republican. Until the last State convention I was a Republican without any handle to the name; since then I have been an Independent-Progressive-Republican, and whether I can remain such will depend on the price I have to pay for my seat in the legislature and in Congress. What are the terms of the bargain?"

"Well," said Mr. Allingham, tapping the table with his hat-brim, "I suppose all the details will have to be arranged between the Colonel and yourself. He mentioned only two conditions last Saturday, if I remember right. He expressed a willingness to switch from Ephraim Wardell to Nels Christianson and to guarantee Christianson's election. In return for this, he would expect you either to dictate a new policy to your

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paper, the *Advance*, or else join with him in buying out the *Advance* and merging it with the *Tribune*. Am I correct, Mr. Kenney?"

"Correct enough," said Kenney with an explosive, unmirthful laugh. He lighted a fresh cigar and continued smoking as if upon a wager.

"Guarantee Christianson's election. Merge the *Advance* with the *Tribune*," repeated Fenton, in a level tone that somehow checked the gentle tap of Mr. Allingham's hat-brim and that drew and held the hitherto averted gaze of Mayor Kenney. "That would be a poor trade. The first condition is unnecessary and the second is impossible."

"The Colonel seems to count them both into the day's work, John."

"Then it's time the Colonel primed up on the Penfield County situation. No one can beat Nels Christianson for attorney-general, and to talk of switching from Wardell is ridiculous. Eph Wardell's record is so rotten and so well known that he will make no kind of run for re-election; he will be shot to pieces before he has gone a mile."

"That's straight!" ejaculated Kenney, banging the table with his fist. "Eph would n't get so much as a look-in at the primaries. I've told Hartshorne all along that it would n't do to run him again."

"Oh, well, as to that," interposed Mr. Allingham, hastily, "the Colonel doubtless referred to the office rather than to the present incumbent." He arose, extending his hand to Fenton. "Think well of it, John,"

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he said as before. "The game is n't begun yet. The Colonel is only dealing the cards, and if you don't like the hand he has dealt you this time, throw it down and call for another. He is ready to meet you half-way, and you would better put yourself on his side of the game. It's the winning side — and you can't afford to lose." The last half-dozen words were brought out with quiet but significant emphasis.

Fenton laughed as his hand closed warmly over the slim, chilly palm of the millionaire. "So the Colonel is still trying to keep Rothney down in the class of 'one paper' towns!" he remarked. "He has been pretty successful in maintaining a journalistic single standard so far, but he may find that he cannot get rid of the *Advance* as easily as he disposed of the *Bulletin* and the *Times*. Please tell him that if he wants to buy out the *Advance*, he will have to go direct to its owner and proprietor, Philander Armstrong. I have nothing to do with it."

For a moment Mr. Allingham looked puzzled; then he smiled as if Fenton's words contained a *nuance* of humor that pleased him. "My dear John," he expostulated, "when friends are talking together in confidence, is it necessary to call a spade an agricultural implement?"

"No, Mr. Allingham. To the editor of the *Advance*, as well as to myself, a spade is a spade every time. Phil Armstrong owns his paper absolutely, and there is no one with power to dictate what he shall do or say. I admit that a truly independent newspaper

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is a rare phenomenon, but I think there's no doubt that we've got one in the *Rothney Advance*; in the fourteen months of its existence it has gained a circulation two-thirds as large as that of the *Tribune*; it is the liveliest, best printed, best managed paper in Penfield County, and it will take a bigger man than Nick Hartshorne to put it out of business."

"It has a flippant, catch-penny tone," declared Mr. Allingham with a sudden touch of asperity. "The diatribes that it hurled at the railroads during the car shortage last Winter would have been actionable if they had not been beneath notice."

"Yes, Armstrong went a little too far that time," agreed Fenton cheerfully. "He has made several mistakes, but he is young enough to profit by experience and he is improving every day. Well, Mr. Allingham, I think I can say without further consideration that I do not care to make any coalition with the Old Guard. I do earnestly desire harmony in the party, and shall do all I can to help it along—*after the primaries*. There will not be much music in the air until after the primaries; then, I, for one, intend to pitch in and work for the high man, whoever he may be. I am seeking no office for myself at present. If the Colonel wants to talk with me further, he knows where to find me."

"Well and squarely spoken, John," said Mr. Allingham, cordially. "The Colonel could not expect a fairer or franker reply. And now, I believe I have just about time to make my train."

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Edward Kenney walked over to the railroad station with Mr. Allingham. The first block was traversed in silence, the two men fighting their way against the gusty onslaught of a summer storm that had been threatening for the past hour. When a lull came in the dust-laden hurricane, the mayor spoke. "Well, Mr. Allingham! What did I tell you?"

"Hm — yes," murmured Mr. Allingham.

"I knew Fenton would n't take that Wardell bait — it was too rank," growled Kenney. "Hartshorne had better listen to me next time. If he'd let *me* handle the thing —"

"You have been in no condition this evening to handle anything," said Mr. Allingham tartly.

Kenney was by this time sufficiently sobered to recognize the justice of the statement. He did not argue the point. "I think I see Fenton's game," he said presently. "He thinks Hartshorne's machine will go to pieces this year like the one-hoss shay; he's going to wait until Old Nick is down-and-out, and then he will jump in and give the whole show himself."

"Possibly, possibly," said Mr. Allingham, relapsing into his former ruminative tone. "If your surmise be correct, all the more reason for keeping on workable terms with Fenton now."

The mayor ground an oath between his teeth. "I say, have done with him!" he exclaimed. "Why should we trim our course to suit his? — why not let him do the trimming? For my part, I've had all I can stand of his domineering. I've some scores of my own

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to settle with him and by God, it's time they were settled!"

"Moderate your tone, Mr. Kenney. Remember, we are on the open street. I should like to give you a piece of advice, but unless you are prepared to listen decently I shall not waste breath uttering it."

"Go on," said Kenney, gruffly.

"You are angry with Fenton just now for personal reasons, and you are allowing yourself to be provoked into a very unwise course. This handsome girl whom we found at the office — by the way, I fancy I met her in the hotel lobby before dinner —" Mr. Allingham paused inquiringly.

"She's my new telephone girl. I've always noticed her more or less, but I never could get a word or a look from her till I offered her this telephone job last week. She took me up on it so quick that I thought —" The mayor jerked the stump of his cigar from his lips and flung it far with a furious gesture. "If I find that she's staying around on Fenton's account," he muttered, "I'll make it hot for both of them!"

"There — you see," sighed Mr. Allingham with the air of a pedagogue whose patience has been exhausted by a pupil's dullness. "Mr. Kenney, my experience of life has shown me that a truly wise man never allows his affairs with women to intersect his business relations with men. If you permit a vulgar quarrel over a woman to come up between yourself and John Fenton at this critical juncture, you may ruin your own

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prospects and undo all that I have been able to accomplish in your behalf. Colonel Hartshorne —”

“But a fellow can't let another man ride roughshod over all his rights and privileges!” stormed Kenney. “It's too much to expect.”

“In the present case the lesser consideration must serve the greater. If this pretty little fool prefers Fenton, why, let him have her! There are many others as fair as she. My dear Edward,” Mr. Allingham's flexible tone lost its monitory quality as he cast an approving glance over Kenney's comely form, “a handsome, magnetic fellow like yourself ought to have things all his own way with the women. If you have lost hold of this girl it must be entirely your own fault. But what is one girl more or less, when your political future rests on the other side of the scale?”

The flattering words and familiar address produced their calculated effect. Kenney threw back his broad shoulders with a laugh. “Well, I do have things my own way, generally,” he replied; and after they had walked a few rods further in silence he added, “there is truth in what you say, Mr. Allingham. I'll not quarrel with Fenton if I can help it.”

It was not the first time that these two had stood in the relation of teacher and pupil. Though often unruly under discipline, Edward Kenney invariably learned the lesson assigned him.

“We may see our way to eliminate Fenton later, but just now we must hold on to him at all costs,” said Mr. Allingham, as they stood on the station platform

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looking down the track at the blue smudge of smoke that heralded the approach of train Number Eight. "Concerning this young insurgent editor. . . . I am rather glad to know that John is not backing him financially. Of course, since John says that he is not backing him, it must be true." He spoke as though Fenton's truthfulness were an infirmity to be borne with as charitably as possible. "Where did Armstrong get his capital?"

"I understand his father put it up."

"Ah! Father a prominent man?"

"Oh, no. The family are plain country people back East somewhere — Pennsylvania, I think. They must be tolerably well fixed or they could n't afford to send the boy to college and set him up in the newspaper business with as fine a plant as he's got here."

"How old is he?"

"Phil? About twenty-five."

"I have been told that he affects the 'simple life' in journalism — writes all his editorials himself, sets them up, prints them, and sweeps out afterwards."

Kenney grinned due appreciation of Mr. Allingham's sneer.

"Jesting aside," added the millionaire in a different tone, "how many assistants does he employ?"

"Only two in the office, a man and a boy. Harry Bunson works for him outside, gathering news and drumming up subscriptions and ads."

"Hm! Then the responsibility of the concern is vested solely in the one man — Armstrong."

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"Yes, except as he chooses to accept advice from Fenton and one or two others in the insurgent crowd."

Mr. Allingham smiled as if well pleased. "The next time I stop over in Rothney," he said gently, "I will have a talk with this young puppy and give him some advice of another sort."

The mayor stared incredulously, and then laughed. "You'll find his bite even worse than his bark," he said.

"I will undertake to muzzle him. The open manner in which the *Advance* underbid the *Tribune* on that State printing contract indicates that the editor might be amenable to arguments of — ah — a certain sort."

"I doubt it. Armstrong did n't care a damn about getting that contract; all he wanted was to discredit the *Tribune* by forcing the bid so low that everybody would see it was a fake."

"Well," Mr. Allingham stepped back from the suffocating blast of the engine as Number Eight bore down upon the station, "I will offer him the alternative of coming to terms or getting out of business. It is not likely that he will hesitate in his choice. Or, if he does, so much the worse for him."

The train pulled out of the station in the teeth of the storm. As Fenton left his office, five minutes after the other men had gone, the wind was already a gale; through the premature twilight, Main Street presented a vista of ascending dust-clouds against a background of livid sky. At the Hotel Kenney, scores of incandescent lamps twinkled a petty response to the forked

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white lightning; the parlor pianola thrummed a two-step through the majestic roll of the thunder.

Fenton crossed Main Street and walked slowly past the hotel. The windows afforded a full view of the brightly lighted office; several men were lounging comfortably in leather-covered chairs, filling the room with the blue haze of their cigars, and against the polished, brass-railed registry desk leaned Billy Hunter, sleek, bald, and affably smiling. The telephone girl was not there. Fenton walked on, recalling his scene with Florence, down to its final moment of blind passion; he grew hot with a strong back-fire of disgust. Where was the buoyant uplift of his early morning inspiration? — where were the ideals which he had thought fit to be measured with Alice Delamere's? . . . Looking back upon the day he realized that its busy routine had sounded one continuous note of expectation throughout — the thought of seeing Alice after his work was done. Should he go to her yet, in spite of all? . . . He halted a long minute at the corner; then instead of turning up Bellevue Avenue toward his lodging, he went on down Main Street to the livery stable and ordered his horse.

CHAPTER XII

THE AUTHOR OF "ARDIETTA" STANDS CONFESSED

FROM the window-seat on the stair-landing, Alice Delamere looked out upon a dazzling alternation of light and darkness in which the black landscape and heavily-banked horizon incessantly appeared and vanished before her eyes. As yet the storm was confined to an upper atmosphere; beneath its constant flicker and distant roar the dry earth lay suspensefully quiescent; the cottonwoods, visible in flashes, stood motionless, betraying not so much as the quiver of a single leaf.

"I d' know 's it 's safe for you to sit so near that big window, Alice," warned Mrs. Bowen, who was wandering uneasily about, trying very hard not to see the lightning and deriving what comfort she might from the mild radiance of the porcelain-shaded lamp on the table in the living-room. "You 'd better come away."

"One place is as safe as another," Alice replied. "I never saw such magnificent lightning. Oh! You ought to have seen that flash! It ran like a line of handwriting, half way across the sky."

"I don't want to see it. Dear me! I 'most wish Johnny was here. Things never seem so scareful when there 's a man 'round."

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Mrs. Bowen disappeared into the dining-room. Alice kept her post of observation on the landing, with her elbows on the window-sill and her chin in her hands. She welcomed the oncoming tempest, after the sultry dullness of the day just past; she had been working to the limit of her slender strength, and now that the strength was spent she yielded like a weary child to the mastery of cosmic forces at war before her eyes, feeling her own small human struggle dwindle into insignificance. The manufacture of her novel had been resumed on the basis of a compromise whereby the secondary hero had been deposed from his superior position and Clarence compelled to fill the vacancy left by the blue pencilling of several sprightly scenes in which the utility-man had borne the chief part. The heroine adapted herself gracefully to the new order of things, but not so the secondary hero. Plainly his good-will was alienated; never again would he be, as in the past, a cheerful helper and convenient stop-gap. Worse still, the inconsistency between Clarence's sudden display of frantic energy and his former shirking indifference could be reconciled only by a thorough revision of foregoing chapters. Alice felt unequal to this revision at present; she pushed the story ahead, driving her uninspired pen through page after page of the most perfunctory composition she had ever perpetrated.

The storm broke at last in a crashing climax, the rain pouring in a cataract from the rent clouds and pounding the window-pane with heavy strokes. The sky was a

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yawning gulf of incandescence, with scarcely an instant of darkness to bridge its blinding depths.

Presently, above the roar of the rain, Alice heard John Fenton's voice in the next room. While not confessedly sharing Mrs. Bowen's feminine reliance upon the protection of "a man 'round," she was glad that he had come. He entered the living-room and glanced about it quickly, looking for her; when he discovered her in the pale lamplight that struck upward through the spindles of the stairway he took the three steps to the landing at a bound. "Why, Mr. Fenton!" she said as she gave him her hand. "How dared you start from town in the face of such a storm?"

"It was a risk," he admitted. "I just made it — Romaine broke his record. I had been counting on coming, all day, and I would n't give it up at the last minute. Well, Miss Delamere, how has the world been going at Willow Branch?"

"Oh, the usual gay whirl. Had you a pleasant trip?"

"Yes, thank you. It was satisfactory in the main." He smiled gravely, thinking of the spiritual stock-taking that alone had made the Chicago trip memorable; then, as his eyes rested earnestly upon Alice, his expression took on a shade of concern. "What have you been doing with yourself lately?" he demanded. "I believe you have grown pale and thin in the short time I have been away."

"Strange! I was not conscious of pining in your absence."

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His chin went up expressively. After an elaborate thunder-peal had plunged down a gamut of explosion to a level reverberation and rolled away in cavernous echo, its final rumble lost in the sibilant clamor of the rain, Fenton remarked, "You are enough to make a saint swear."

"Am I? Then it happens quite fortunately that you are not a saint."

He laughed quietly. Time was when he would have been in doubt whether this languid satire should be taken as a manifestation of the real Alice or only as one of the many little "shams" that had misled his earlier judgment of her, but since reading "Ardietta" he knew the difference between the real and the sham. He saw the weariness and discouragement beneath the thin mask of her present mood, and he longed to comfort her in some way. He was not very clear in what way. He curbed the impulse as dangerous. Leaning back in his corner of the window-seat he said concisely, "You are working too hard on that new novel of yours."

At least he gained her attention by the speech. She lifted her chin from her supporting hands and gave him a slow, sidelong glance. "What makes you think that I am writing a novel?" she asked.

"Several things have led me to that conclusion. By the way, I made a delightful new acquaintance on my way home. Would n't you like to hear about it? I think you would be interested."

"Certainly. Tell me all about her."

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"Why 'her?'"

"Is n't it a woman?"

"Indirectly, yes. It is a book. I have been reading 'Ardietta,' by Sarah Gray."

Her lip formed a small, half-audible "Oh!" She sat erect, her listlessness all gone.

"If it is not an impertinent question, I should like to ask why in the name of common sense you called yourself Sarah Gray."

"Then the truth is out? Where did you see it, Mr. Fenton? In some newspaper, I suppose."

He repeated the substance of the *Journal* paragraph. "It seemed to be official," he said. "Did n't you authorize the statement?"

"Yes, but I did not expect that it would be in general circulation so soon." She remained in her pose of arrested attention, her eyes still on Fenton's face, but he perceived that her gaze went through him as if he were so much empty space. Her thoughts had taken instant flight to the outer circles of effect that widened from the central fact of her publisher's revelation. She imagined her novel in the hands of Alfred Beverly, who had probably read it ere this as the work of Sarah Gray, and would re-read it, with the keenest criticism of which he was capable, as the work of Alice Delamere. The pen-name that she had assumed solely to escape his too accurate interpretation might after all defeat its own purpose. Yet now that the truth was out, Alice discovered to her own surprise that Alfred's opinion had somehow lost weight in her estimation and

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that she really cared very little what impression he received from "Ardietta."

Though Fenton could not follow her thoughts in their rapid excursion he knew the exact moment at which they returned to himself.

"You asked me why I called myself Sarah Gray," she said, her eyes sparkling mischievously. "How can you ask? Because I was 'ashamed to sign my own name,' of course! What do you think of my 'fake seller'? Did I 'fail lamentably in trying to write like a man'? And which is my hero, an 'impudent bully' or an 'impossible paragon'?"

"I can plainly hear the quotation marks around those phrases. Whatever I may have said about women novelists and women's heroes, I take it all back, though it applies to ninety-nine cases out of a hundred. Your book is exceptionally truthful and artistic — one of the best novels I ever read. The main situation is a strong one and you have handled it nobly. As for the workmanship, I can't see a flaw anywhere."

"This is high praise."

"It is meant to be. You must know that the story deserves all that can be said in praise. No one could write a thing like that without knowing how good it was."

"I shall never write anything else to compare with it," declared Alice, the light fading from her expression. "I put into 'Ardietta' all the heart and soul and inspiration that I had, and now — there is nothing left."

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"That can't be!" rejoined Fenton, warmly. "The writing of such a book must be like loving some one better than one's self; it is possible to give *all*, and yet be none the poorer."

Usually Alice parried discussion of her own literary work, preferring to let the work speak for itself, but she allowed John Fenton to utter his whole mind on the subject of "Ardietta" both as to matter and method; and as he took up each feature of the story in detail she found that he had read it more understandingly than any one else who had passed criticism upon it in her hearing. His comprehension seemed like a clear mirror of her purpose; his sympathetic intuition fitted her present discouragement as a key fits a lock, smoothly opening a door that she had been vainly trying to batter down. Already the story of Clarence and Laura and the disaffected secondary hero began to seem more human, less impossible. Surely John Fenton's faith in her ability could not be wholly misplaced; it might be true, even as he said, that she was none the poorer for writing "Ardietta."

She told him more than she had ever told any one else, how the story had come to her in the first place like an unbidden guest, and how, in writing it, she had found herself entertaining the sovereign opportunity of her artistic career. "I had not expected to write fiction when I entered magazine work," she said. "I had not imagined that I could do it."

"You must have been very happy while you were writing the story."

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"Not when I began. I was only trying to be happy — but by the time I had finished, I *was* happy."

Fenton looked at her silently, and in a flash he understood the real meaning of "Ardietta," the buoyant gladness that sounded the triumph over a conquered sorrow. His heart went out to Alice with a rush of yearning tenderness — he knew so well what it meant to long for joys beyond reach, to forego cherished hopes, and to make the best of such alternatives as the common round of life held out from day to day. Against his will he contrasted her way of winning happiness with the worldly pleasure chase that had worn out the heart and soul of Norma Hirschmann, and the reckless, ignorant determination of Florence Conley to be "happy no matter what it cost." He thrust the thought aside, resenting its approach to Alice even by contrast.

"And your new novel?" he said abruptly. "You *are* writing one?"

"Yes."

"It does not satisfy you?"

"It is the poorest work I have ever done. I made the contract last Winter, but since my long illness it has seemed impossible to get back into the spirit of things. I have forgotten how to write. My hand has lost its cunning."

"You should not be writing at all!" said Fenton emphatically. "Shut up your desk, get out in the sunshine and chase butterflies! Why should you publish another novel yet? You can afford to rest on the success of 'Ardietta' for the present. Let well alone

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—quit writing until the inspiration comes—it will come, never fear."

The storm wore itself out gradually as the evening passed. When Fenton rode back to town at eleven o'clock, one half the sky was clear, a cloudless open plain of moonlight, the moon an old one lately risen and shining with the whiteness of fine silver that has been worn thin by much polishing. Across the north and west stretched a mountain range of opaque gray cloud with a soundless play of lightning among its jagged peaks. There was a meeting of three great silences—the silence of the dark, drenched, beaten earth, of the calmly ascendant moonlight, and of the immeasurably distant conflict that still raged beneath the western horizon.

Fenton brought Romaine to the veranda steps and stood for a moment with the bridle over his arm while Alice, a step above, caressed the sleek mahogany neck of the thoroughbred and threaded her fingers through his silky black mane. The girl's face shone like a lily in the moonlight. She seemed a part of the pure, unclouded serenity that Fenton left behind him as he rode away toward Rothney and the flickering cloud.

CHAPTER XIII

FENTON ENTERS THE TEMPLE

NEXT day's report of the storm showed that while the neighborhood of Rothney had sustained little damage beyond the lodging of a few oat-fields, the country further west had been completely devastated by hail. Many farmers in the vicinity of Hubbell lost their entire crop that night. On a thousand acres owned by the Rothney Land & Investment Company the wheat was literally pounded into the ground, the bruised stalks barely pricking through the furrowed mud. In the language of the *Rothney Tribune*, Hubbell had been "served with a holocaust of hail."

The clerks in the office of the R. L. & I. knew the company's share of the general loss, and were therefore prepared for some slight barometric disturbance in the managerial temper, but to their surprise, J. F. seemed even more cheerful and good-humored than usual on the morning after the storm. Fenton scarcely knew, himself, why he accepted the facts so optimistically, but he felt that the magnetism of his power to help others was at an exceptionally high voltage and he used it all day long, encouraging the dispirited farmers who straggled into his office to recount their misfortunes, and

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sending each man away with the burden of anxiety much lightened by his practical counsel.

It was a busy day for the R. L. & I. The hail-insurance agency was so beset with personal calls, telephone messages, and telegrams, that Dick Harvey was detailed to assist the agent while General Manager Fenton handled his own voluminous correspondence with such aid as young Westcott had time to give. Returning to the office after luncheon Fenton found Jefferson Hayward waiting to see him. Jeff had grown a degree thinner and more ghastly in the past fortnight; his resolute smile, drawn in deep lines about his pale lips and lustreless eyes, had the set look of a mask. He had been in the saddle all morning and his riding boots were streaked with mud.

"Well," he said in his characteristic drawl, after exchanging greetings with Fenton, "I've got it in the neck this time, sure thing." He hitched one booted leg across the other and slung his hat across his knee. "I lost half my crop last night," he said, and smiled.

"You hailed out?" said Fenton in surprise. "Why, I didn't know it struck so far north as that. Are you sure? — have you been over the ground?"

"Been all over it this morning," nodded Jeff calmly. "Don't I look as if I'd been riding some? Yes, the storm went in streaks, but I estimate that it took about half of the standing grain."

"You have insurance in the Farmers' Hail & Cyclone, have n't you?"

"Um-hm — enough to cover the cost of putting

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in the crop. The funny part of it is that I'm not a bit sorry it happened. I'm glad. It gives me a chance to pull out. See?"

"No, I don't quite see. You'll have to show me," said Fenton, trying to meet Jeff's half-humorous introduction of the subject in a similar tone; but as he swung back in his chair and waited for enlightenment his face looked graver than it had been before that day.

"I'm going to take Lottie and the girlie back to Indiana for a visit," Jeff went on. "We call it a 'visit,' you understand. The harvest will be so small that it's not worth while to wait for it. Lottie was all broken up at first when I told her what the hail had done to us, but I turned around and sprung this plan on her—the visit to her folks—and she was all in the notion of it at once. She wants to start packing to-morrow."

"A good idea, Jeff. There's no telling what a rest and a change might do for you just now."

"According to the way I've got things figured out," said Jeff, slowly measuring his words, "I'll probably last about a month or six weeks longer. Dr. Crane does n't think it'll be much more than that. For a good while past I've been thinking how it was n't quite fair to Lottie that this trouble should come on her away out here, so far from all her folks. If she could have her father and mother at hand, she'd bear it better. And now the crop falling through gives me a reasonable excuse for quitting. So I've come in, Mr. Fenton, to put my affairs in your hands for settlement. List the

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farm for immediate sale — cash if possible, near-cash as the next best thing. The place is in first-class shape, buildings in good repair, and all that. If we can get squared around in time, we'll start for Indiana next week."

He drew from his pocket an account-book containing a full statement of his finances, and laid it open for Fenton's inspection. His land was free from encumbrance; though his assets were small, his liabilities were smaller; his venture spelt neither failure nor success — it seemed a single syllable, a mere prefix. After he had run over the accounts with Fenton, he closed the book and sat staring fixedly out of the window, while the typewriters in the outer office went on cackling their ceaseless note of activity.

"Then there's another thing," said Jeff. "I want to put a codicil to my will, instructing Lottie to hold on to those city lots in Grantham that I bought last Spring. I'm afraid she'll sell them if I don't make my wishes pretty clear, and the property is going to be worth a pot of money some day. I suppose you have the will handy?"

"Yes, it is here in the safe." Fenton arose as if glad to find relief in action, and took from the safe the box containing Hayward's papers. After the codicil had been affixed to the will, Jeff read the testament through very deliberately and handed it to Fenton, who also read it.

"Guess that's all right?" said Jeff.

Fenton nodded. He reached across the desk for his

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notary's seal; a touch of the buzzer silenced the noise of one typewriter and brought young Westcott to the open door. "Come here, Westcott, and witness Mr. Hayward's signature."

Westcott advanced, his face lengthening as he perceived the nature of the document. He glanced at Hayward with the remote awe which fills the mind of youth at the thought of preparation for departure from this world, and signed his name with a clerkly flourish. After he had withdrawn, a difficult moment ensued for the two men who sat opposite each other at the desk.

"Mr. Fenton, I've never said much to you about all you've done for me," Jeff began at last. "I was sure you knew how I felt about it. Lottie will never forget your kindness to us — and the girlie shan't forget it either. You've been our best friend."

"Oh, I've done mighty little but stand by and look on at your plucky fight. I've felt ashamed of my own hulking strength — it seemed so useless, when I could n't use it to help you."

"'Stand by?'" repeated Jeff. "Yes, I should say you *have* stood by, through thick and thin. My pluck would n't have amounted to much without the brace you gave it now and then. I can tell you, Mr. Fenton, any man will turn coward if he tries to stand alone. I suppose the Lord made us that way for our own good. We'd all of us be mean enough to play a lone hand if we could win the game that way."

"That is not the way you have tried to win, Jeff."

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"No, but maybe it would have been if I had n't got scared. Oh, I was scared all right! When a doctor levels his opinion at you like a gun and says, 'Here, you've got to die,' any fellow will throw up his hands. I don't care how brave he may think himself, the first thing he feels, and the only thing, is fear — fear that sticks in his throat and chokes him. He may try to bluff it, perhaps. 'Die?' he says. 'Why, certainly. Of course I've got to die. Everybody has to die some time.' But, Lord! it don't help a bit. So he has to keep gulping at the fear until he gets it down like a pill. 'Well,' he says, 'what's next?' And he finds that the next thing's worse than the fear — it's the unwillingness that must be swallowed one drop at a time, day after day, and it's bitterer than gall and wormwood. God! What I suffered from that unwillingness! . . . I raged and swore that I would not die, that nothing could make me die. The cords that held me to earth were like steel cables — the love for my wife and my precious girlie and my love of life for its own sake —" The young man stopped with a groan, burying his face in his hands.

"But you never turned coward," protested Fenton. "You have met the thing like a man."

"The cords were wound about my heart so tight that they could n't be broken," Jeff went on. "It was only after I stopped trying to break them that I began to get free." He raised his head and re-assumed the smiling mask that had dropped from his face during his brief outburst of emotion. "So it's been getting

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easier," he said, sitting upright and forcing back his rounded shoulders. "The fear is gone, and the unwillingness is gone, and it's all right — *all right*. The same love that made it seem impossible to die is going to make it easy when the time comes. I used to think that the strength of love was in its power to hold on, but I guess that a love that's worth anything has got to learn when to let go. Well!" He sprang up and held out his hand. "It's time I was moving on towards home."

Fenton also arose, grasping the outstretched hand and laying his left arm around Jeff's shoulder. "Jeff," he said earnestly, "you have done *me* more good than any other man I have ever known."

Jeff's only reply was the sudden shining of a light through his mask. His friend had said exactly the right word — a thing John Fenton was rather likely to do. The hardest part of Jeff's trial had been the rebellious, constantly recurring thought that it was all utterly for nought and that no one would be the gainer thereby. The two men walked slowly across the room, their hands still clasped. By the time they reached the door Jeff had regained command of himself. "I'll see you again, Mr. Fenton, not later than Saturday," he said cheerfully. "So long!" He swung through the outer office with his loose-jointed stride; as he emerged upon the sidewalk he was whistling a tune.

Fenton worked late that day, returning to the office after dinner to finish important letters that must go by the early morning flyer. He came forth at last into

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the sweet, cool summer night with a heat of brain and tension of nerve that were unusual. He decided to take a ride before going to bed.

"Guess you'll have a tolerably lively ride, Mr. Fenton," remarked the stable-man at Gray's Livery as he led Romaine from his stall. "Your hoss is full of ginger to-night."

"That suits me," said Fenton. "So — stop your nonsense, boy!"

Romaine came to rest with military precision, and stood like a statue as Fenton swung into the saddle; then he whirled out of the stable with a flourish of dancing heels. He had carried his master a mile beyond the last arc-light at the west end of Main Street before he sobered to a steady lope. Fenton took his way toward the hail-stricken district, thinking that if it were not too dark for observation he might verify the reports that had been brought him of the damage to the Land Company's wheat-fields. The night was moonless as yet but crystal clear, the sky fairly crowded with stars. Along the northwest lingered the persistent afterglow of the sunset; in the east, Rothney's electric lights flashed blue against the horizon; off toward the north a few dimmer lights marked the spot from which the new town, Hubbell, had begun to radiate over the plain; south and west lay the limitless gray obscurity of uninhabited space.

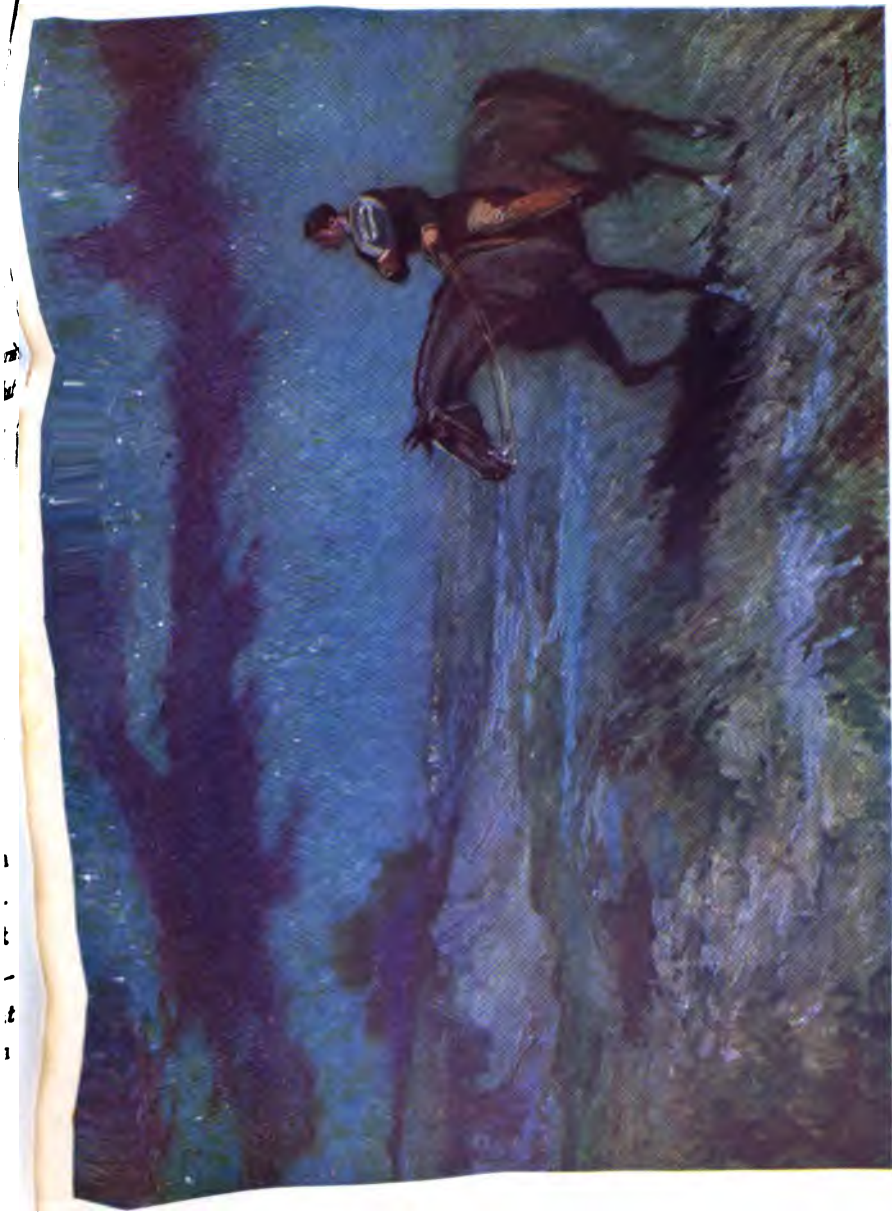
Fenton slowed Romaine's pace to a walk on reaching the southern end of the R. L. & I. tract, which spread out before him like a trampled battle-ground, crossed

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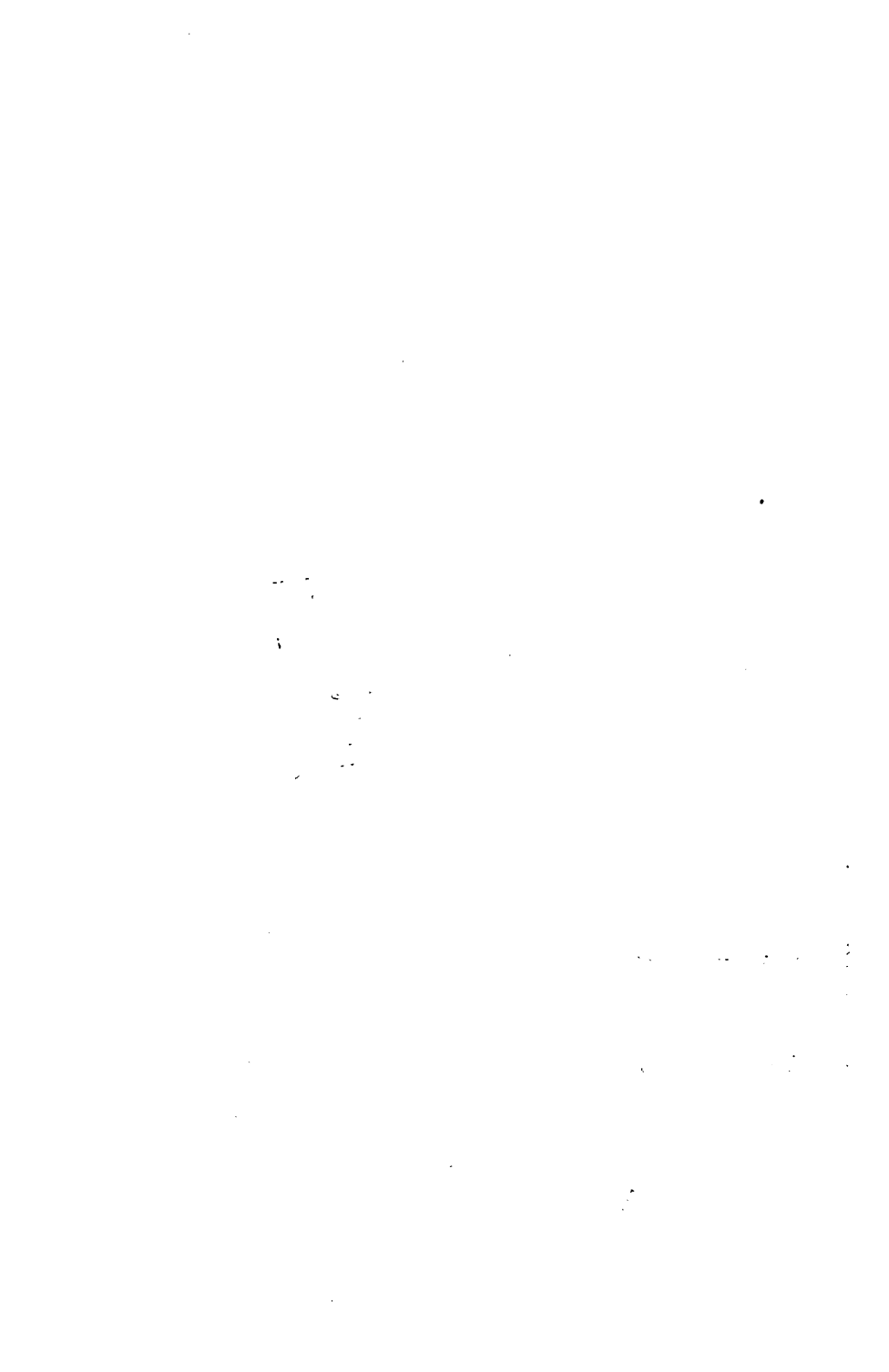
by ridges resembling breached earthworks. Here and there a bunch of wheat, not totally destroyed, lay like a prostrate human form. In sheltered spots, beneath heaped clods, the melting of great hailstones had been so gradual through the day that fragments of ice might still have been found in the cold little pools that remained.

Fenton surveyed the silent witness of the storm's spent fury with a feeling akin to the sad doubt that had filled his mind that morning as he talked with Jefferson Hayward — a doubt of the existence of eternal justice. His glance, lifted in a slow sweep of the further prospect, was arrested by a single light that twinkled some distance apart from the Hubbell constellation. He recognized it by the direction as the lamp in Hayward's shack, and as he looked, the small, insignificant gleam became to his eyes the central point of the surrounding plain and shone with all the resolute cheerfulness of Jeff's own smile. "A love that is worth anything has got to learn when to let go" . . . Fenton squared his shoulders, drawing a deep breath of protest against a thought so cruelly oppressive. Never before had he felt so conscious of the chains that bound *him* to earth and life and the joy of living — never before so keenly realized the superb vitality that bounded in his veins, the strength of his own hold on things material, the impossibility of "letting go."

He turned Romaine's head and rode slowly westward. To the financial loss represented by the trampled field on his right, he gave hardly a thought. The night



Suddenly Fenton reined in his horse . . . and bared his head as at the



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breeze was strong in his face; the scent of wild-roses and yellow cone-flowers, poignantly sweet, rose from the dark wayside like incense before an invisible shrine. The air thrilled with stimulus to the spiritual sense as well as to the physical senses; to be of such an earth, earthy, seemed no great sin.

Suddenly Fenton reined in his horse as at a word of command, and bared his head as at the passing of a Presence. Out of the perfumed solitude a revelation had come to him, filling the silent spaces about him and reaching up to the spangled steel blue arch above; and the joy of the revelation was like none other that had come to him in all his life. The love he had given to that first sweetheart of his, long ago, had been but a boy's worship in the outer court of a temple that he entered to-night for the first time. Between that early love and this new one lay years of determined absentation from the temple, years filled with joyless victories over the temptations that beset a man who cannot marry as he will and will not marry as he can, but bereft of the bliss that is every man's right; for Fenton had vowed on the day Constance sent him from her that he would never ask another woman to share his clouded name. The vow had been kept; it had preserved him from linking his fate to that of Willard Bennington's divorced wife, and it had hardened his heart against the beauty and charm of many a girl far worthier than Norma. And now, *now*, after his passionate nature had been trained to philosophic acceptance of the inevitable, and he had grown to think himself secure,

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he had been conquered unawares, heart, soul, and body, by a woman whom he had seen for the first time a few short weeks ago! Almost unbelievable it seemed, yet true — blessedly true. He surrendered gladly, unconditionally — then came swift reaction, recollection, despair.

To the loosening of the taut rein Romaine responded as to the prick of a spur, dashing away into the gray obscurity, across sodden, trackless fields. Fenton had often ridden thus, in the old days on the ranch, digging real spurs into the rough flank of a broncho whose spirit was scarcely wilder than his own. The fate that had exiled him then pursued him now like a hound that had regained a lost trail. His body throbbed in a single pulse of agony; his collar choked him like a noose.

The mad rush into the unfolding gray depths of the night continued until Fenton was brought to his senses by the flagging of his horse's pace. Romaine did not immediately obey the curb of the rein, but flew ahead, half stumbling, as if somehow impelled on a tangent that had no end. The man spoke three times, and hauled back on the bridle with all his strength, before the excited thoroughbred stood still. Fenton slipped from the saddle and drew the animal's head to his shoulder. "Romaine, dear old boy!" he said remorsefully. "It was brutal to ride you like that — and useless, too; I might ride to the ends of the earth, yet I could n't get away."

Romaine breathed gustily across his master's shoulder. He did not understand the pursuing impulse behind

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Fenton's strange mood, but he accepted his apology like a gentleman. For several moments they stood together, horse and man, as much alone in the surrounding silence as if they had indeed travelled to the ends of the earth. The lights of Rothney had paled to a faint auroral streak in the distance and Hubbell was entirely hidden behind a shoulder of rising ground. The loneliness of the scene was rather enhanced by the dim outline of a deserted sod house near by — a hovel belonging to a speculative homesteader who held his claim at the smallest possible sacrifice of his own personal convenience and was at this moment playing prohibited poker and drinking prohibited whiskey behind the closed doors of a prosperous incognito saloon ten miles away.

Fenton rode slowly toward Rothney, his practical, objective mind already planning the action that must be taken in the crisis that confronted him. At twenty-one he had thrown himself upon a similar crisis without shield or weapon, trusting to courage alone; at thirty-nine he was willing to give himself the benefit of all stratagem known to civilized warfare. He renounced the vow he had kept so long, and resolved to marry Alice Delamere if he could make her love him well enough to accept him. Of course, he would tell her the truth about himself — he *must* tell her; the only question was, how and when? If he told her at once it would be at the risk of throwing away his chance; if he won her first and told her afterwards, that would be taking an unfair advantage.

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The question was far from settled when he reached Rothney at one in the morning. The attendant at Gray's Livery sat collapsed in his chair, dozing over a day-old *St. Paul Dispatch*; he arose with a yawn and strolled to the door as he heard the ring of hoofs on the paved approach. Romaine paced slowly into the stable, bowing his graceful head with every apathetic step.

"Quite a diff'rent lookin' hoss," remarked the man. "Guess you took the ginger out of him all right."

"Yes, I rode him too hard," admitted Fenton. "Give him a little extra care, please." His hand was in his pocket as he spoke, and a moment later the hand of the stable-man slid into the corresponding repository of his corduroys.

"Sure, Mr. Fenton. I'll have him O. K. in the mornin'."

The man led the drooping Romaine away to his stall, and Fenton walked up town to his lodgings on Bellevue Avenue. A small residue of saffron-colored moon appeared low in the southeast, shedding hardly any light; under the shade of roofs and trees the night seemed darker than on the open prairie. And the question in Fenton's mind grew darker, too, as he fitted his accustomed latch-key into the accustomed door of Mr. Leroy's solemn, square-roofed house, and pausing to turn off the single electric light that had been left for him in the hall, mounted the accustomed stairs to his room.

CHAPTER XIV

"THE RISK IS MINE"

MRS. BRONSON, housekeeper of the Hotel Kenney, called at the office of the R. L. & I. next morning to make a payment on some property she had bought a few months before. She lingered a few moments to chat with Fenton, whom she liked, as all women liked him, for the generous, chivalrous spirit that entered into even the simplest of his business dealings. She was a careworn, mannerly little woman who sustained with dignity the uncongenial position she occupied at the hotel. Knowing her discretion, and also taking into consideration the fact that she was a comparative stranger in Rothney, Fenton did not hesitate to ask her whether Florence Conley was still at the telephone desk.

"She left yesterday," said Mrs. Bronson. "Her week was up yesterday, and she left."

"Did she go back to Melburn?"

"No. She went to Brookline Farm with the lady who lives there — a Mrs. Todd."

"Mrs. Todd?" echoed Fenton, quickly. "Oh, that's good! I am very glad." He checked himself at the look of inquiry in the housekeeper's dim, spectacled eyes. "I used to know Miss Conley's brother,"

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he added, more in answer to the look than in continuance of his own remark. "His death, two years ago, left her entirely alone in the world. I am glad that Mrs. Todd has taken an interest in her. She will be much better off at Brookline Farm than at the Hotel Kenney."

"I should certainly think so," replied Mrs. Bronson. "It's not suitable to put a young girl in a hotel office like that. It has worried me to see her there, but I couldn't do anything about it. I have nothing to do with the office assistants. I do hope that when Mr. Kenney fills the place he will hire a boy. Mrs. Todd seems a very nice lady. She came into town for the day, to do some shopping, and took dinner at the hotel. She had a talk with Miss Conley after dinner, and later Miss Conley came to my room with her hat on and told me she was leaving. Mr. Kenney was very angry when he got back from Grantham and found the girl had gone, but I could n't see that it was my place to stop her from going. I believe she is to help Mrs. Todd with some sewing."

Mrs. Bronson's communication relieved Fenton's mind of all anxiety about Florence. At last the girl would have the thing she needed most, the protection of a woman who had known her from childhood and knew all the best and the worst of her. It was more than Fenton had hoped for, that the mistress of Brookline Farm should voluntarily take into her home a girl whose wild ways had already given rise to so much unkind gossip — but all the more honor to Mrs. Todd for

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daring to do it! Secure in her own personal integrity and high social position, Mrs. Todd could do for Florence Conley what no other woman could have done so well, what no man could have done at all. Fenton's own experience in trying to “take Dan's place” had proved his masculine unfitness to cope with the situation. He had repeatedly found employment for Florence, who repeatedly lost it through some impertinence to her employer or neglect of her task. He had lectured her in her perversity and comforted her in her distress; he had accepted her ready dependence upon him as a natural expression of childish irresponsibility; he had shut his eyes to her beauty when he felt his senses lured by it, and not until the scene in his office had he admitted the possibility of danger either for the girl or for himself. That one moment had revealed the foregone unwisdom of his attempt to take Dan's place. Well! She was safe now, at any rate. The fact that Florence had accepted Mrs. Todd's protection inspired Fenton with a deeper respect for the girl than he had hitherto thought she deserved. He did not know that she had gained her first clear view of her own folly through his eyes, and that it was his swift, silent conquering of a man's temptation that had shocked her frivolous mind to an awakening of the “woman's pride” that his spoken appeal had failed to arouse. On the whole, it was better that he did not know.

For two days Fenton put off going to Willow Branch, and went at last without intention, the Ward Farm

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being his destination when he set forth at twilight, riding against the sweep of an autumnal rain. His way necessarily led past Willow Branch, and as he traversed the ground he had been over so many times this Summer his thoughts were wholly of Alice — restless, unhappy thoughts in which his will and his desire fought desperately. He checked Romaine to a footpace on approaching the cottonwood lane, rode fifty yards beyond — wheeled and rode back. He still assured himself that he should not go to the house, — certainly not; in the old khaki hunting-suit and oilskin jacket that he had donned for the rough weather, he was not presentable — but it could do no harm to ride a little nearer, taking a short-cut that he sometimes used across Mrs. Bowen's fields. He halted a short distance from the house. Through the windows of the living-room shone the rosy glow of a fire on the hearth. The fireplace had been included in the plan of the room primarily to provide a proper setting for a pair of andirons much prized by Mrs. Bowen, but it had seldom been used. To-night the yellow birch sticks burned merrily, pouring a stream of white flame from the heart of the fire and wreathing with curls of red and blue the edges of bark that had not yet lost their identity in the blaze. The low-ceiled room was peopled by dancing shadows; all the light of the fire seemed concentrated upon the figure of the young woman who stood upon the hearth-rug. Outside, under the dripping trees, Fenton sat his horse like an equestrian statue.

Alice took up the tongs and turned the back log,

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after which she disappeared into the depths of a high-backed chintz chair facing the fireplace. At this, the equestrian statue came to life, and five minutes later Fenton was shedding his oilskin coat in the kitchen.

The sound of his step preceded him to the living-room; when he appeared at the door, pausing a second on the threshold, he met Alice's look turned expectantly toward him. She seemed surprised to see him, yet her smile expressed a frank and unaffected welcome.

“May I come in? I'm not fit to be seen — I'm dressed like a tramp.” He spoke in a low tone, his phrases short and subdued.

“Come in, by all means. If you are really dressed like a tramp, you must be a sight worth seeing. Step into the light and let me look at you.” He obeyed, standing before her with one arm on the shelf of the mantel. “Really, Mr. Fenton, you ought to wear khaki all the time; it's immensely becoming. Is this the way you used to dress on the range?”

“On the range? . . . Oh, I looked even rougher than this, sometimes.”

She returned his sombre gaze with a quizzical knitting of her delicate brows. She had never seen him so solemn. “Won't you sit down?” she said, waving her hand toward a chair. “And it will be in order for you to say something in praise of this fire. I made it — with Chan's help. Mrs. Bowen laughed at the idea, but I thought the evening seemed cold and dreary enough to offer a good excuse for a fire.”

“It looks cheerful, and — homelike. I saw it from

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outside, as I rode in. By the way, how is Chan keeping his bargain about the shack? I infer that he is observing the rules, as I have heard nothing to the contrary."

"Yes, he is observing them perfectly. Chan and I are becoming excellent friends, Mr. Fenton. I find him very interesting in many ways."

"He is capable enough, when he chooses to put his wits to work. He may amount to something some day, in spite of the fact that he can never be a 'gentleman.'"

"He has been very industrious lately, carving something that he will not show to any one. He declined to sit here this evening and help me hunt pictures in the fire, because he preferred to work. Mrs. Bowen ran away and left me, too. Mrs. Nelson called and took her off to a special meeting of the Missionary Society."

"And what have your thoughts been, as you sat here all alone?"

"I have been planning the next chapter of my novel."

"I told you to stop working on that novel."

"So you did, and I have obeyed you in the spirit though not in the letter. It is only when work becomes drudgery that it wearies me; for the past three days it has been a pleasure to write. Do you know why? It's because you helped me so much, Mr. Fenton. You encouraged me to hope that I had not said my last word in 'Ardietta,' after all."

Fenton looked at her, searching in vain for some rise of color in her cheek, some tremor of the soft brown eyelashes, some image of himself in her lucent eyes.

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He had helped her, and she was duly grateful — and that was all. “I am glad that I could be of service to you, Miss Delamere,” he said restrainedly.

“Was n’t it Hawthorne who said that ‘discouragement is disenchanted egotism’? If the saying is true, I must be a sorry egotist — I have been so sorely discouraged.”

“Your discouragement is a simple case of overwork. You need a long rest.”

“I believe that I do; and I shall take a vacation after this manuscript is finished. I may go abroad for a few months before resuming my editorial work on the ‘Aurora.’”

To this Fenton made no reply. Her words projected before his imagination a future in which he had no part. She would soon go away from him, would soon forget him. Up to this moment his mind had been so occupied with the larger problems involved in his love for her that he had not considered the fatuity of asking her to share the life he led in Rothney. He thought of it now, his eyes moodily fixed upon the fire, while Alice talked of her proposed trip abroad and marvelled that he should be so indifferent to the topic. At last he arose and took a step forward, holding out his hand. “I must go,” he said, almost curtly. “Good night, Miss Delamere.”

“Go? You have only just come.”

“I did n’t intend to come when I left town. I was on my way to Ward’s. I am due there now.”

She slowly slid her smooth little palm into his

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outstretched hand. "I hope you are not going to fight a duel with Mr. Ward," she said. "You look as if you might be about to intrust me with some 'last messages.'"

"No. I can find trouble enough nearer home." He gently let her fingers slip from his clasp, but remained standing beside her, his hand on the high back of her chair. "Dave Stanley expects to begin cutting wheat Monday if the weather is favorable," he said presently. "I think you said I might take you to see his binders lined up on his five-section field."

"Yes."

"When may I call for you — morning or afternoon?"

"Suit your own convenience. The hours are all alike at Willow Branch."

"Then I'll come in the morning."

His step was slow as he crossed the room. On reaching the door he stopped, turned suddenly, and walked back to the fireplace, his expression so changed that Alice looked at him in startled question as he once more stood beside her.

"For two days and nights," he said hurriedly, "I have been trying to nerve myself to the point of telling you something — something that you will have to know sooner or later. It relates to circumstances in my life, known to no one now living except myself. I told it once to the girl I then expected to marry, thinking that she had a right to know the truth about me before she married me. She broke the engagement after she

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heard my story. It's a story of shame and disgrace and a wrong that can never be set right. I shall never tell it again, except to *you*. Will you listen?"

The words rushed past Alice like an express train, leaving only a confused sense of headlong speed and unknown destination. "I—I don't understand," she faltered.

"No, of course not! The only way to understand is to hear the whole thing out from the beginning to end. I have kept it to myself, for eighteen years. I have been silent, to shield others. I made a promise of silence, that binds me in reference to every one—every one but yourself, Miss Delamere. I would n't ask you to hear me now, if I did n't know the risk of putting it off. I know that if I let it go much longer, I shall care less for the truth than for—for your good opinion of me."

There was no mistaking his gaze of passionate avowal—its meaning outran his half-comprehended speech. Alice made a quick gesture of denial. "Oh, no, no, *no!*" she exclaimed.

"Why do you refuse? The risk is mine."

"Mr. Fenton, it is impossible."

"Why impossible?"

She hesitated. "I have no claim upon a confidence of such grave importance. I have no right to know anything of your past life that is not known to all your friends."

Her lips trembled at the last word; her eyes fell before his. There was a brief, vibrant silence.

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"I understand," he said. The ardent appeal that had throbbed in his voice a moment before now lay lifeless in his measured tones. "I am sorry that I have distressed you, Miss Delamere. Forgive me."

'After he had gone she longed to call him back, and to say something that should soften her rebuff. "Yet there was no other way to answer him!" she grieved. "*I had* to do it."

When Mrs. Bowen returned from the missionary meeting she found Alice sitting in the dark before a neglected fire that had sunk to a few smoldering coals.

CHAPTER XV

“MISS ELLICE” INTERVENES

HAVING declined to hear John Fenton's story, Alice conscientiously tried to refrain from speculating upon its mysterious possibilities. Nevertheless, the mere fact that his life contained a mystery would have been enough to disturb her peace of mind had there been no other disturbing element in her reflections. He had seemed so honest, fearless, and self-respecting that the idea of “shame and disgrace” could with difficulty be attached to him even on his own representation. Alice hoped that her refusal to hear him might prove the wisest course in the end, but in less than twenty-four hours she regretted the wording of that refusal. To tell him that she had no claim upon his confidence was worse than unkind — it was inconsistent. Their friendship, brief as it had been in point of time, fully justified the granting of his request. Her startled denial of his claim had been made not to the friend, but to the lover unexpectedly revealed in the person of that friend. And now, alas! nothing could ever be the same again. Mingled with her regret for the disappointment she must inflict upon him — if he had really fallen in love with her, he must be cured of the hopeless fancy as soon as possible — was a forlorn

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kind of sorrow for herself, as she thought how much brighter and happier her own life might have been if the love of a man like John Fenton could have come to her years ago, before Alfred Beverly's shallow, selfish passion had taken Love's name in vain.

With John Fenton occupying the foreground of her imagination Alice continued work on her novel until she caught herself in the act of idly sketching geometrical figures across the page upon which she should have been chronicling the acts of Clarence and Laura. She impatiently flung down the truant pen and proceeded to read over all that she had written since morning. She found it absolutely worthless. Displeased with herself — and with Fenton, too, as the ultimate cause of the day's fiasco — she tossed the scribbled pages into the waste-basket, carried the basket down stairs, and emptied its contents into the kitchen stove. The basket had made so many such pilgrimages this Summer that Christine Larson had ceased to wonder at the quantity of good white paper that "Miss Ellice" first covered with writing and then destroyed. The Swedish maid was washing the dinner dishes with fearful energy, her face flushed from recent weeping.

"Have you a headache, Christine?" asked Alice, kindly, as she turned to leave the room. "Here — give me a towel, and I will dry these cups and saucers for you."

Faintly demurring, Christine took a clean towel from the dresser and handed it to Alice. "Na, Miss Ellice, t'ank you, et's not headeck," she replied, choking back

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a sob as she resumed her attack upon the dish-pan. “I ben *mad*. Ole,” the knives and forks rattled in the pan like a charge of musketry, “Ole, he say he von’d teck me to da picnic t’morra.”

“Indeed? Why is that?”

“He say,” stated Christine, stiffening with a sense of her wrongs — she possessed a remarkably strong, erect spine, a short upper lip and a pair of eyes that slanted upward at the outer corners, and when her temper was aroused she was formidable — “he say, ‘Tinie, I don’d vand you to vare your blue hat to da picnic. I don’d leck et,’ he say. ‘Et ben too loud,’ he say. ‘Ef you vare dat hat to da picnic, ve can’d hear da band play.’”

“Is it the blue chiffon hat that you wear on Sundays? — the one trimmed with pink roses?”

“Ya. Et’s my *best* hat. I say to Ole, ‘I’ll vare just vat I please.’ ‘You von’d do dat efter ve’re marrit,’ he say. ‘I’ll not hev my vife vare t’ings dat meck folks stare.’ ‘Vell, I’m not your vife yet,’ I say. Dann Ole, he get mad leck da dicken, and he say, ‘Tinie, ef you vare dat hat to da picnic, I’ll not teck you to da picnic.’ I say, ‘All right; you don’d hev to.’ And he vend away.”

Christine wrung her dish-cloth violently. Alice went on demurely polishing Aunt Julia’s pink-and-white cups, while she considered Christine’s words. She had not been much prepossessed by what she had seen of Ole Carlson; he was a big, egotistical youth who had worked his way up to a position on the right side of the mystical dividing line between “wages” and “salary,” from

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which height he was wont to look somewhat condescendingly upon the little sweetheart whom Alice thought far too good for him. Yet there was ground for his objection to the blue chiffon hat, and the fact that Christine did not generally incline to gaudy adornment only added to the affront of his well-founded criticism.

"Have you another hat that you could wear to-morrow?"

"Only da old gray one. Et luks leck da dicken. Et got vet in da rain — Miss Ellice remembers."

"It might be re-trimmed. For my own part, I think it is prettier than the blue chiffon."

"Da blue hat ben awful expensia," said Christine, ruefully.

"That may be. The most expensive things are not always the prettiest. Suppose you bring both your hats to my room and let me see if I can remodel one of them for you to wear to-morrow. Ole will be sorry for what he said — he will be back before the day is over — and if I were you I'd make up this silly little quarrel right away. You must n't allow so small a matter to make trouble between yourself and the man you have promised to marry."

"Miss Ellice ben awful good," murmured Christine, her clouded face brightening. She lost no time in availing herself of Miss Delamere's offer; in less than half an hour she presented herself at the young lady's door with the two hats and a wreath of white flowers. "I t'ought," she suggested shyly, "Miss Ellice might leck to put da white flowers on da blue hat."

“Miss Ellice” Intervenes

“Yes, if you are willing to have the pink ones taken off.”

“Miss Ellice can do yust vat she pleases,” beamed Christine.

Thus authorized, Alice set to work. The time had been when she trimmed all her own hats, and did it so skilfully that no one suspected her of being the milliner. She found that she had not lost her knack of tasteful economy; Christine’s hats prospered far better than the fortunes of Clarence and Laura, under Alice’s divided attention, and when Christine beheld the result—the white flowers blossoming harmoniously against the background of turquoise chiffon, the gray turban taking a new lease of life from its bunch of fresh pink roses—she could hardly express her wonder and delight. Balancing a hat on each hand and gazing from one to the other, she exclaimed, “Yust leck new! Yust leck new!” over and over again; adding at last, with a triumphant toss of the head, “I guess Ole don’d got nottin’ to say, now.”

Apparently, however, Mr. Carlson had much to say when he came that evening, and apparently his mission of reconciliation proved successful. He drove away at ten o’clock, gayly whistling, “Cheer up, Mary, don’t be sighing.” A moment later Christine came around the house and spoke across the veranda railing. “Is Miss Ellice here?”

“Yes, Christine, she is here.”

Christine was in a happy flutter, and her English was at its worst, as it was apt to be after continuous discourse

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in the vernacular, but she reported a brilliant victory over Ole. She had taken a high hand with him from the start, and after reducing him to a state of complete subjection in which he actually besought her to please herself by wearing the blue hat to the picnic, she had brought out the two creations of Alice's magic and displayed them before his astonished gaze. "He luk at one hat, and he luk at t'odder, and he leck one yust so good leck t'odder," she said gleefully. "I say, 'Ole, vich skall I vare?' He say, 'I don'd care.' I say 'You gotta chooce.' Dann Ole, he toss a penny, and da blue hat got et!"

"True poetic justice!" laughed Miss Delamere. "Well, Christine, I am very glad that the matter is settled with such good feeling on both sides."

"Et ben all Miss Ellice," declared the girl, gratefully. "Miss Ellice settlet everyt'ing."

Christine returned to the kitchen, and as she finished the evening tasks that had been interrupted by Ole's early and prolonged call, she gave expression to her joyous mood in a song of incongruously doleful measure. Listening to her weird musical performance, Alice mused, "I suppose I must not count this day utterly wasted, if I have really been instrumental in patching up a lover's quarrel"—then she sighed, thinking of how little the story of Clarence and Laura had advanced that day, and of how far from being "settlet" were her own perplexed, sorrowful thoughts of the lover whom she had already tacitly rejected.

CHAPTER XVI

“ ’T WILL COME, ALAS! ”

THE next time Alice saw Fenton was on the morning that Jefferson Hayward and his wife left for Indiana. A score of Jeff's friends had gathered at the station, Mrs. Bowen and Alice among the number. Fenton was so busy attending to tickets, trunks, and telegrams, and performing other services for the travellers, that he had scarcely time for a word with any one; as he bade Alice good morning his eyes met hers gravely, but with none of the passion and despair with which they had looked upon her last. The impression that he had given far less thought to their interview than she had expended upon it herself sent a proud little flush to her cheek and a sudden chill to her manner. Fenton interpreted these signs in terms of self-criticism. “ It's my own fault! ” he thought. “ I spoke too soon, and I've thrown away my chance.”

Though many of Jeff's friends believed that they were saying good-bye to him for all time, there was no talk of anything but good wishes for a safe journey and a happy “ visit ” in Indiana, and Jeff's cheerfulness remained intact to the end. Lottie seemed to have lost her haunting anxiety in the pleasurable excitement of the occasion; in her fresh gown and new hat she looked

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almost as blooming as when she came to Rothney, a bride. Little Charlotte, her dimpled face peeping like a pink prairie rose from the frill of her white lace bonnet, comported herself with the gracious self-importance of a royal infant while being tenderly handed about from one to another of the assembled women. When the moment of departure arrived, Fenton carried Charlotte aboard the train; through the car window Alice saw that the child clung to him as he placed her upon her mother's lap. "She wants me to go too, does n't she?" said Fenton, smiling. He took off his hat and bent his head to kiss the baby mouth that was held up to him, then gripped Jeff's hand silently and swung off the car as the train began to move. Jeff and Lottie waved handkerchiefs from the window until the faces of the group on the station platform became a blur in the increasing distance.

"We'll never see Jeff again, Johnny," said Mrs. Bowen, sadly.

"No," Fenton answered simply.

"Let's go over to Riverside this evening, Alice," suggested Mrs. Bowen at the supper table. "We're owing a call there, since Mrs. Stanley and Mad'line came to see us; and besides, I must see Miss Peck about her report for the Missionary Society."

Alice agreeing to the proposition, the phaeton was brought around, and the two women drove to Riverside through the deep twilight that fell early from an overcast sky. Riverside had become a scene of gayety since

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the arrival of Madeline Allingham's house party. Madeline had carried out her plan of driving the motor up from Minneapolis, chaperoned by a bride of about her own age. The party had been stormbound at St. Cloud and mired at two other points on the route, but reached Rothney in effervescent spirits; the ponderous touring-car, which pulled in from its final run so covered with mud as to be hardly recognizable, was soon restored to its pristine splendor and might be seen daily tearing through the streets of the town and along the better graded roads of the surrounding prairie. Madeline's guests treated Rothney as if it were a theatre in which they were temporarily treading the boards for the benefit of the whole countryside. They invaded the Main Street shops with demands for expensive trifles rarely called for; they kept Smith's new soda-fountain in a whirl of activity; they took possession of the post office, at mail time, as if it were being conducted for their exclusive accommodation. They displayed the perfect self-sufficiency, the indifference to others' seniority, that mark twentieth-century American youth, yet their manners were always most polite. They played tennis by day, and danced and sang college songs by night and whatever else was done or left undone, they laughed.

Mrs. Bowen guided Sally along the Riverside driveway at a walk. From some distance she had espied an automobile lying opposite the house, and though so far as she knew Sally had become inured to the sight of horseless vehicles, it was as well to be prepared for sudden reversion to original prejudice on the part of

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the headstrong old animal. From the house, which was brilliantly illuminated, came the hum of voices, the tinkle of a piano, the ripple of laughter, and the perfume of several fine cigars.

"I just b'lieve they've got extra comp'ny this evening," said Mrs. Bowen. "This is Senator Christianson's auto, and here's the Nelson victoria, and Phil Armstrong's runabout, and — is n't that Johnny's horse, tied to the post further down?"

"It looks like Romaine," said Alice.

Dave Stanley came out, cigar in hand, as soon as he heard the slow gritting of the phaeton wheels on the sandy drive. "Oh, hello, hello!" he called hospitably. "Glad to see you, ladies. Come on in."

"If you're having a party, Dave, I don't know 's we'd better"—

"Party? Shucks! 'Tain't no party — just a few of the neighbors dropped in. We're havin' that kind of parties from sun-up to sun-up, these days. The more, the merrier."

Dave took Sally's bridle, led the mare to a post and tied her, whereupon the ladies alighted from the phaeton perforce and were ushered into the porch with a stentorian announcement that brought Mrs. Stanley swiftly to receive them. Under the soft light of shaded hanging lamps the company had grouped itself in natural subdivisions. Madeline's guests from the twin-cities — bright-eyed, slender young girls in white frocks, many of whom still wore broad ribbon bows on their turned-up braids, and young men with the well-fleshed,

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loosely-hung forms of callow athletes, and manes of football hair tumbling over their shapely foreheads — flocked in twos and threes. The older men were talking politics and smoking Dave's best cigars — State Senator Christianson, a sturdy, well-polished Swedish-American; August Nelson, a similar type, though less smoothly surfaced; Philander Armstrong, the lean, hawk-eyed editor of the *Rothney Advance*; Dave himself, and John Fenton. Mrs. Bowen and Miss Delamere were added to the group of women just beyond, and after the arrival had been recognized by all present the men resumed their cigars and their political discussion. The general issues of the campaign had been eclipsed for the time being by the incident that had brought last night's meeting of the town council to an abrupt adjournment. The Honorable Edward Kenney had tendered his resignation, to take effect immediately; owing to the lack of a quorum the matter had been put over to the next meeting, when, in accordance with regular procedure, John Fenton, president of the council, would probably be appointed to complete the seven months of Mayor Kenney's unexpired term.

“Mr. Kenney has bequeathed a mountain of unfinished business to his successor,” observed Senator Christianson.

“Yes, and how does he dare do it, I'd like to know?” demanded Dave. “He's got nerve enough for a dozen. How does he dare leave them pavin' contracts up in the air, with all the graft that's stickin' to 'em? And that shy deal on the county seat contest, too. John, if you

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get things straightened out before next election, it'll be more 'n I look for."

"I may not have to straighten them out," said Fenton, calmly. "Wait until after the council meeting. The Kenney men may rally their forces and insist on a special election."

"Provitet they contennue to be Kenney men," said August Nelson. "The mayor's best frendts are the men most surpriced by his ressignation. Some of them are very sore ofer it."

"That's what beats me," said Dave. "Ed don't seem to have taken anybody with him — he's made the bolt all by himself. He's got some game, o' course — but what?"

"We are all wrestling with that problem," said the senator, smiling. "What do you say, John?"

"Pass it up to Armstrong," said Fenton. "He knows more about it than any of the rest of us."

Usually the editor of the *Advance* showed a caution in his speech equalled only by his audacity in print, but this time he delivered his opinion on demand. "Kenney has two ends in view," he said. "He gives up the mayor's job so that he may be free to chase bigger game. He gives the mayor's job to Fenton — there will be no special election; Fenton will be named unanimously by the council — to tie Fenton's hands and to keep him out of the State campaign. It's an easy conundrum, as I look at it."

Phil spoke with an extreme slowness that was not a

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drawl and that conveyed no impression of mental indolence; through his leisurely manner one felt the throb of a temporarily disconnected dynamo. This was only one of his manners of speech — by some people called his mannerisms; there were times when all his energies seemed geared together and running at high-pressure speed, and at such moments his rapid utterance of short, uninflected sentences resembled the bark of a machine gun.

There was a short silence, during which the other men considered his explanation of the Kenney mystery. His opinion was always worth considering, and often it carried conviction even when far from correct. During four years at the University of Pennsylvania and two years on the staff of a Philadelphia daily paper, he had had the opportunity to witness a highly interesting and instructive drama of municipal misgovernment; he had seen the play from behind the scenes, from the prompter's box, from pit and gallery, and by his continuous attendance on the spectacle he had acquired a knowledge of political trickery such as few men but the tricksters ever acquire. “If Armstrong should turn grafter himself,” a journalistic associate of his had once remarked, “he would out-graft everybody and everything in sight.”

“I think you may be right so far as Kenney's action relates to Fenton,” said the senator, thoughtfully puffing his cigar, “but I don't see what chance Ed has to chase big game. It is common talk at the capital that

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he has broken with Colonel Hartshorne; and the Colonel is going to deal rather harshly with poachers this season."

"Oh, well, those breaks with Hartshorne are often faked on the basis of a private understanding," replied Phil. "There is a rumor afloat that Kenney has made an alliance with Jim Turnbull and the Consolidated Implement Company, and I suspect it's true. If true, it would naturally involve a sham battle with Old Nick for the early part of the campaign. But Turnbull and Hartshorne have never, as I understand it, fought anything to a finish in all the years that they have been running this sovereign commonwealth; they will fall on each other's necks at the State convention if they don't do it before, and when they have made up their seeming differences Kenney may be dropped with a thud that can be heard clear to Washington. And again, he may *not* be dropped; it will depend somewhat upon how much cash he has been able to dig up in the meantime. His fate will be just where it is now and always has been — in the hands of Nick Hartshorne."

"How will Nick use him?" inquired Fenton.

"As a stool-pigeon, to draw votes from Starkey," replied Phil.

"By George! I'll bet you're right!" exclaimed Dave.

Fragments of this talk reached Alice Delamere through the interstices of Mrs. Nelson's chatter. Suddenly the piano in the drawing-room, having been silent for a space, re-asserted itself in a sweep of stately

“'T will Come, Alas!”

chords. A man began singing, in a resonant tenor voice:

“Oh, dry those tears,
And calm those fears,
Life is not made for sorrow;
’T will come, alas!
But ’t will soon pass,
Clouds will be sunshine to-morrow.”

“Ah, Mr. Sutherland is singing — we must listen,” said Mrs. Christianson; and the group of women ceased talking, even Mrs. Nelson. The young people gathered nearer the open French windows of the drawing-room; but the political discussion went on unchecked, Dave Stanley’s voice in the lead.

“Oh, lift thine eyes
To the blue skies,
See how the clouds do borrow
Brightness, each one,
Straight from the sun;
So is it ever with sorrow,”

sang Sutherland, to an accompaniment brilliantly played by Madeline Allingham.

“’T will come, alas!
But ’t will soon pass,
Clouds will be sunshine to-morrow.”

“And that,” vociferated Dave across the wave of pianoforte interlude, “is pre-cisely what ’ll happen if no senatorial candidate gets forty per cent of the total primary vote. Back goes the election into the legislature, same as under the old convention system.”

“We-ell, not exactly,” dissented Armstrong, lounging at ease in his comfortable chair, serenely tone-

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deaf to the music. "In all human probability some one candidate will get the requisite forty per cent. And supposing he does n't, there will be precious few legislators willing to violate their moral obligation to ratify the people's choice. Our primary law is a poor law, I grant you, but it's a step in the right direction."

The argument continued, Dave warming with his theme, while August Nelson listened advertently, as his habit was, and Fenton and the senator allowed their attention to be drawn aside by Sutherland's impassioned *vibrato*.

"Clouds will be sunshine to-morrow.
Oh, dry those tears,
Life is not made for sorrow!"

A murmur of applause followed the conclusion of the song. "Oh, Mr. Sutherland, please sing some more!" begged one of the young girls. "Madeline, *make* him sing."

"*Encore*, Sutherland!"

"Say, give us one of Chauncey Olcott's."

"What's that he's been singin'?" inquired Dave, who had caught a few words of the refrain. "'Clouds will be sunshine to-morrow?' Huh! Hope to gracious he's right. If he ain't, I'm due to lose 'bout five hundred acres of oats that ought to 've been cut two days ago."

"I suppose you didn't get any cutting done to-day?" said Christianson.

"Not a cut. Tried to put a couple of binders into the oats this mornin' but one of 'em stuck fast and I had

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to hitch on two extra horses to pull it out, so I quit. It'll take twenty-four hours of dry weather to get the ground so it'll bear the weight of the machines. Never saw such a stretch of weather in my life.”

Between the parted lace curtains of a window Madeline appeared, smiling. She wore a gown of thin silken stuff matched to the golden tint of her hair and shimmering like sunshine with every movement of her lissome young body. Above the round neck of her bodice and below the elbow-strap of her sleeve her smooth flesh gleamed like ivory; she was not pale — only “wondrous fair.” A peculiar shadow deepened the expression of Philander Armstrong's dark, angular face as he looked at her. John Fenton's eyes were upon her, too; indeed, every man present regarded her with different degrees and qualities of admiration as she stood there in the light of the lamp hanging directly above her, framed by the misty whiteness of the parted curtain, her gown like cloth-of-gold, her face like a tinted white rose, her hair like a golden crown. “An *édition de luxe* in white-and-gold,” thought Armstrong.

“Uncle Dave, are you still growling about the weather?” she asked, stepping from the window. “He has been roaring like a caged lion all day, just because he could n't cut oats!” She flashed an adorable glance around the circle of men. “I tried to cheer him up by offering him a ride in the motor.”

The owners of the football fair laughed appreciatively, Dave's eccentric aversion to motors affording an inexhaustible fund of amusement upon which many

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drafts had already been made without perceptibly diminishing its value.

"You don't catch *me* gettin' into the blame thing," said Dave, dismissing the suggestion with his usual frankness; but he looked up at Madeline affectionately as he struck the ash from his cigar.

Algernon Sutherland had followed Madeline from the drawing-room and now stood beside Mrs. Christianson, gracefully acknowledging her compliments upon his singing, and looking down at the lady with that air of serious, un-American devotion that made him so popular with American women. He was a fine-skinned, mild-eyed young man, appearing so slender in his little dinner jacket that one wondered where all his tenor resonance came from.

"I often think that we really *impose* upon Mr. Sutherland," said Mrs. Stanley, with the effusive emphasis which she made do duty for earnestness. "His songs are *such* a delight, we forget that his throat must be *tired* sometimes."

Algernon smiled sweetly. "I never know that I have a throat," he replied.

Madeline soon affected a re-arrangement of all the groups on the porch. She broke up the political discussion by the subtraction of Phil Armstrong, whom she carried off, a willing captive; she left him to the tender mercies of Miss Delamere, and then took possession of John Fenton, with whom she promenaded the length of the porch and back. Fenton understood why she had thus singled him out when he encountered

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Algernon Sutherland's mild eyes levelled upon him in courteous but significant observation. He looked down at Madeline with a laugh, in which Madeline mischievously joined, and though not a word was spoken, Fenton knew that he was but an instrument in the hands of justice, meting out some form of discipline to Algy. Again the piano sounded from the drawing-room, this time under a hand less skilled than Madeline's but producing a magical effect by the swinging triple rhythm of the music played. The young men began clearing the drawing-room floor, and in a moment two or three couples were waltzing. The evening program at Riverside was never complete without at least one waltz, one two-step, and a song with an easy, rollicking chorus in which every one could join. Fenton halted Madeline gently at the open hall door. "May I have a turn?" he asked. "Or is the privilege reserved for some one more worthy?"

"You may have it this time," she replied, slipping into the curve of his arm, "because you are so seldom here. I can dance with the *boys* any time." Her emphasis was subtly flattering to the man of nine-and-thirty who a dozen years ago had given her picture-books and bon-bons and had called her his "little sweetheart."

Watching the figures of Fenton and his partner cross and recross the lighted open doorway, Phil Armstrong formed a determination which he put into action when the waltz was followed by a two-step. He was not a society man by inclination and had acquired few social accomplishments. The previous winter he had attended

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a dancing-class just long enough to become convinced that he could never master the waltz, but not long enough to reach a similar conclusion in regard to the two-step. Neither dance interested him particularly — he had joined the class through the over-persuasion of a friend — but when he saw the graceful automatism with which John Fenton guided Madeline Allingham to and fro, reversing their course as smoothly as he advanced, Phil realized with regret his own manifest inability to do likewise. “I suppose he learned when he was a kid,” he reflected. “That’s much the best way.” Nevertheless, he moved forward to the execution of his resolve. “Miss Allingham, will you dance this two-step with me?” he asked.

The girl’s eyes widened in surprise at the blunt, business-like tone of the proposition, then sparkled with a friendly smile. “Certainly, Mr. Armstrong,” she replied; and nodding over her shoulder to Fenton, who had stood lightly fanning her with a large palm-leaf, she laid her hand on the editor’s arm and moved away.

Armstrong danced awkwardly but definitely, while Madeline still smiled — whether at him or with him, mattered little to him in his present frame of mind. It was enough for him that he held in his arms this *edition de luxe* of radiant young girlhood, this beautiful, cherished daughter of Loudon B. Allingham, the multi-millionaire who only two days before had walked into his editorial office and magnificently offered to buy him out, body and soul. The memory of his interview with Mr. Allingham was hot in Armstrong’s brain as he

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propelled Madeline through that vigorous two-step ; unconsciously his clasp of her slender form tightened until it resembled a policeman's grasp of a prisoner. She looked up, rebuke hovering upon her lips, but on meeting his eyes she remained silent. His expression changed, his arm suddenly relaxed.

“ I — I beg your pardon,” he stammered. “ I don't understand this sort of thing. I know I do it badly.”

They dropped out from among the other gliding, sliding couples, and walked slowly into the porch. “ You dance very well, Mr. Armstrong, only you should do it oftener, to keep in practice,” said Madeline.

There was in her tone a touch of suave mendacity so like her father's that for a moment Armstrong felt as if he hated the girl. Only for a moment ! Once more he was swept by that other emotion, not yet fully understood by himself, which flamed up in his soul whenever he crossed Madeline's path or caught a glimpse of her face.

Mrs. Bowen and Alice were the first of the company to leave. Neither of them had exchanged a word directly with John Fenton — a fact which Mrs. Bowen, at least, had not noticed. As they drove away from Riverside, a chorus of fresh young voices followed from a distance, waking the evening stillness to the strains of a lively tune. Every one sang on the refrain, even Dave Stanley and Phil Armstrong adding a few wandering bass notes here and there —

“ You were my queen in calico,
I was your bashful barefoot beau,
You wrote on my slate, ‘ I love you, Joe,’
When we were a couple of kids ! ”

CHAPTER XVII

A WRONG THAT CAN NEVER BE SET RIGHT

LOOKING from her window next Monday morning, Alice saw that at Riverside the harvest hour had struck. Over night, apparently, yonder field had been transformed from a smoothly cushioned expanse of standing grain to a sheer yellow stubble dotted with brown knobs.

"Yes, Dave began cutting at daybreak," said Mrs. Bowen when Alice reported the sight. "I guess all the farmers will be getting their binders into the field today; the wheat is just ripe enough and the weather could n't be better. Would you like to drive over to Riverside this morning, Alice?"

"I — I rather expect that Mr. Fenton will call for me, Aunt Julia."

"Oh! very well." Mrs. Bowen nodded, smiling wisely.

Alice did not doubt that Fenton would keep the engagement made on that memorable evening in front of the birch-log fire; and while she dreaded being alone with him she knew that only by meeting thus could they look the situation frankly in the face and readjust the disturbed balance of their relation to each other. She felt that Fenton had acted wisely in absenting himself for the past few days; if he came this morning, prepared to

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take up their interrupted association just where it had been dropped, she would meet him half-way, and outwardly all might go on as before.

He arrived soon after nine o'clock, and Alice, ready except for her hat and gloves, did not keep him waiting a moment. If they talked of the weather as they drove away, they may well be pardoned for the choice of so banal a topic; at present the weather meant everything to the dwellers in this great wheat country—meant all the difference between failure and success, hope and despair—and to-day the sun was shining for the first time in two weeks. The air seemed triple-distilled; the sky was without a cloud, shading from dazzling sapphire at the zenith to soft violet at the horizon; the fields were gray and glistening with dew, and every way-side rose was set with brilliants. High on the top of a telephone-pole sat a brown meadow-lark, carolling as gayly as if the Summer were but just begun, while on the field beneath, a flash of dappled wings marked the low flight of a plump young prairie chicken, safe for a few more days from the aim of the hunter's rifle. Mosquito hawks hovered in iridescent flickers over the heavy-headed grain; a flock of road-sparrows, startled from their dust-bath, flew chattering to the topmost wire of a pasture fence; a gopher darted across the road, too quickly to be fairly seen. All living things seemed joyously alert and astir; all Nature seemed keyed to the optimism of Algernon Sutherland's song; on a day like this, it was easy to believe that "Life was not made for sorrow."

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Other sight-seers were already at Riverside when John Fenton and Alice Delamere arrived. The Rothney photographer sat in his buggy, waiting a chance to snap the thirty-five binders after they had formed in line; townfolk who had no grain of their own, but who felt a communal interest in the crop and gave some time each year to watching their neighbors' harvest, had drawn up in sulkies and runabouts at the edge of the field, and were gazing upon the scene as eagerly as if they had never beheld its like before. Dave darted here, there, and everywhere in his little skeleton cart, shouting directions as the binders moved across the road to attack the northern end of his celebrated "five-mile" field. Perceiving Fenton's runabout he wheeled his cart into conversational range.

"Oh, hello, John! How-de-do, Miss Delamere — pleased to see you," he called. "Just make yourselves at home. I ain't got much time to do the honors, but you're welcome all the same. Damn that fellow!" he added under his breath, glaring at a binder that laboriously circled a small tuft of grain left in the middle of the opposite field. "Don't he know better than to waste time over that little mouthful of wheat? Look at *that* once! — he don't know no more 'bout turnin' corners than a baby. Goes backin' his machine 'round like it was a hearse. Guess he needs to be stood on his head a while to let some of his brains run down into his skull. I'll put him at shockin' — that's what." Dave thrust his cigar between his teeth and taking the reins

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in both hands he bore down on the luckless driver with the speed of a whirlwind.

Several of Madeline's young guests who had driven from the house in a bundle-wagon now gathered around a binder that was waiting its turn to fall into line. Madeline herself sat perched on the high seat of the binder, holding whip and reins, and Algernon Sutherland was taking a kodak picture of her, while the brown-cheeked, flaxen-haired driver whom she had deposed stood at a little distance, sheepishly grinning. Descending from the machine Madeline caught sight of Fenton's runabout; she came tripping lightly to Alice's side of the vehicle, followed by Sutherland and two or three of the girls.

"Oh, Miss Delamere!" she exclaimed, after a few moments of talk in which every one had shared. "I was coming over to Willow Branch this afternoon to invite you to my party, but if you don't mind I'll tell you all about it now. You can judge how very informal the affair is to be. Uncle Dave calls it a 'hoe-down.' I want to give one regular dancing party for the boys and girls before they leave me, and as I shall so soon be going away myself, and I don't know how long it may be before I come back to dear old Riverside, I have decided to invite all the young people I know in Rothney and some from Grantham and Ravenna. I shall have an orchestra from Grantham, so that the Rothney band boys may have a chance to dance for once in their lives. I think it must be so poky to be always playing for

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others to dance—don't you? There—I forgot to mention the date. It is to be next Thursday evening."

"I shall be delighted to come, Miss Allingham."

"Good! Mr. Fenton, I may depend on you, may I not? Experienced dancing-men will be at a premium; this is your opportunity to make yourself both useful and ornamental."

"I am very sorry, Miss Madeline, but I can't possibly be here. I am going to the capital Wednesday night."

"To Burnside? How perfectly stupid!" pouted Madeline. "Can't the capital exist without you until Friday?"

"I'm afraid not," said Fenton, laughing. "I am going to attend a board meeting the date of which has already been set. You are not half so sorry as I am," he added.

"Madeline, the machines are starting!" called one of the girls. The words were the signal for a general rush toward the bundle-wagon.

Dave directed the alignment of the machines as they set their reels in revolution along the edge of standing grain, until all thirty-five binders were in motion with an assenting nod of horses' heads, a crisp swish of straw, a loud chatter of knives, and the measured toss of bundles jerked by the hook across the plate. Each binder drove with such precision inside the path of the one in front that as they advanced, their reels twinkling in the sunlight, they formed a perfect diagonal, and cut their mighty swath as evenly as if it had been sliced

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by a single blade. Following the noisy reapers came the silent shockers, sweeping up the bundles and piling them in loose pyramids. Some of the men in sulkies waved their hats and cheered; then all the spectators moved forward, led by the Rothney photographer at a jolting trot. The bundle-wagon was the last vehicle to start, but the first to overtake the head of the procession. Fenton checked his excited horse as the golden straw, cut by the wheels, showered over Alice.

"I will drive slower," he said. "Dave is cutting as high as possible to save straw in the shock, and that makes the stubble a rather poor thoroughfare."

After following the binders for a few moments, he struck off to the right for a side view, shot ahead along the turf border of the field and turned to meet the advancing column, taking care that Alice should see the spectacle in all its possible aspects. She was interested, absorbed, and almost wholly silent; Fenton spoke only now and then, in some brief explanatory comment upon Dave's method of work, and in this manner they drove for nearly half an hour. Before them the five-mile field stretched southward until its golden edge met the violet sky — three thousand acres of wheat, unbroken save by the section-lines, only two of which were travelled roads, and the rude sheds of the division camps in which the men would eat and sleep after their work had carried them too far afield for the daily return to headquarters. Watching the slow encroachment of the reapers upon the solid front of grain, Alice realized the largeness of their task; day after day and week

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after week they must go on thus, and not always in weather so inspiring—more often in the face of scorching heat, wilting humidity, or dessicating wind—driving, monotonously driving, always in the same fixed alignment. “How far will they go to-day?” she asked.

“I believe Dave expects to make two rounds of the first division before noon. We can follow them once around if you wish.”

“No. I must remember that you have many demands upon your time. You have already given up half the morning, Mr. Fenton. Let us turn back!”

“My time is at your disposal, Miss Delamere. It was good of you to come with me.” After an instant he added, “I was afraid you would n’t come.”

She looked down at the lash of bright yellow straw against the wheel, her face half turned away. “I am sorry you thought that,” she said simply.

“I should not have blamed you if you had refused to come,” he answered. “I spoke bluntly the other evening, but not plainly. I should have said more, or else nothing at all. I told you just enough to unsettle your opinion of me. Is n’t that so?”

Alice could not deny the partial truth of his words; yet as she lifted her eyes to meet his earnest gaze, she felt her shaken faith in him restored. “Yes, you were blunt, and I—I was unkind,” she said.

His earnestness kindled into sudden warmth. “Then, let us go back and begin over again!” he exclaimed. “I’ll speak plainly this time, and you will listen.”

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"I am ready to listen, if you are sure that it will do any good — that it will help you —"

"It will help me to do a thing that must be done sometime. Oh, I would shirk it if I could! You will not enjoy it any more than I shall, but it won't take long."

He whirled the runabout and drove from the field into the road. It was so long before he spoke again that Alice's suspense had reached a tenuous breaking-point when he began, "My earliest recollections are connected with the town in southern Illinois in which I spent my childhood and attended school until entering Madison University. I understood that I was an orphan with no relatives nearer than some cousins in Connecticut. My mother's aunt, Miss Phœbe Wilson, had left me money enough to provide for my education. My grandfather — Miss Wilson's brother — had gone to South America and settled there in his youth, as agent for a steamship company. He married a Spanish lady of good family. After his death — his wife had died previously — his only child, Anita, was sent to Connecticut to be brought up by her aunt. Miss Wilson had never approved of her brother's marriage, and there is much reason to believe that she visited some of her disapproval on his half-Spanish daughter. It was an unfortunate combination — the Puritanical New England spinster and the little South American girl could not be expected to understand each other very well. It ended disastrously. Anita Wilson ran away with a man whom she had met repeatedly without her aunt's

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knowledge. She was only eighteen when she became — my mother.”

The tone, the pause, the leaden fall of Fenton’s voice on the last two words, told all. He turned and looked at Alice, and saw her expression change from blankness to incredulity and then to shocked comprehension. A slow, deep red flushed from his neck to his brow; he withdrew his eyes from hers, and for a time he was silent, driving fast along the empty road.

“I doubt if any man can look back to happier school-days than mine,” he resumed. “I grew up in ignorance of the truth about myself, and by the time I learned it I had a man’s strength to shoulder the burden. You told me once that I had failed in my training of Chan because I did not put myself in his place. The words hurt me at the time, but they set me to thinking, too. I might have done better by the boy if there had been no parallel between his case and my own, because with the parallel there’s a wide difference. I undertook the care of him after I learned how much he had suffered from his early half-knowledge of his condition. I might have turned out no better myself, if I had not had a carefree, normal boyhood. But this is beside the story.

“I had a guardian who took charge of my property and came to see me twice a year. I was very fond of him, and as he appeared to be equally fond of me, I sometimes wondered that he never invited me to his home, which was less than a day’s journey from the town in which I lived. He often talked to me about his children,

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a girl and boy both younger than I. My acquaintance with the family came about at last in an unexpected way; I was taking a summer trip with one of the high school professors when I met my guardian's wife and son at a hotel. After this, I spent a great deal of time at their home. It was there that I first met Constance Lane; she was Maia's chum at boarding-school. I was a mere boy, but I made up my mind at once that I would marry Constance some day. She lived in Chicago with her father; she was an only child, and her mother was dead. Fortunately, her father liked me, and when I asked his consent to my marrying Constance, he gave it, only stipulating that we should wait until I had become established in business. I was at Madison then, taking the law course, and I had the prospect of a good opening in Chicago.

"During my last year at the university my guardian's wife died suddenly. The shock of her death had a bad effect on my guardian, who had been more or less of an invalid for several years, subject to attacks of heart trouble. I was sent for with little hope that I could get there in time to see him. He was sinking rapidly when I arrived, but as he had expressed great anxiety to see me I was taken at once to his room. He sent the nurse away and received me alone. He held out both hands to me and called me 'Son.' I have never known exactly what my feeling was at that moment. It seemed as if I must have known the truth always.

"He was too weak to talk much, and our interview was necessarily brief. He told me where I should find

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a letter that he had written to me, years ago, giving an account of the circumstances of my birth. He had put it in writing, knowing that he was liable to die suddenly. He had thought it best to keep the truth from me as long as possible, but had been unwilling to go out of the world without making himself known to me. He told me that I had always been very dear to him, and begged my forgiveness for the wrong he had done me. I could n't do less than forgive, at such a time — and I had loved him all my life. He asked for my solemn promise to keep the facts from Maia and her brother. Soon after this he became unconscious, and though he lived until the next day he did not rally nor recognize any one again — so his last look and last words were for *me*.

“ I got away as soon as possible after the funeral. The letter that he had left me was a document of some thirty pages, and gave an account of a quarrel with his father which had once led to his leaving home altogether for a time. It was during this absence that he met Anita Wilson and fell madly in love with her. He took her to a picturesque little place just over the Canadian line — it is an out-of-the-way spot, even now, after forty years; its only connection with the outer world is by a boat that goes up twice a week from the nearest town. Miss Phoebe Wilson started to follow her niece as soon as she learned of her elopement, but it was a long time before she discovered any trace of her whereabouts. She arrived on the scene one day in the temporary absence of my father, and compelled her niece to go away

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with her on the boat that had brought her up from the town. She took her to a village in Vermont, where the Wilsons were not known, and kept her there until the end. The beginning of my life was the end of my mother's, and for this I cannot help feeling that Miss Wilson was responsible. I daresay she provided well enough for my mother's material needs, but her cruelty in other respects was enough to kill any girl so situated. She intercepted the letters that my mother tried to send to my father, kept them, and sent them to him three years later. My father told me that the reading of these letters caused the first of those attacks of heart trouble that made his life so painful and uncertain afterward. Miss Wilson's one idea was to save the family name, and she took the most roundabout way of accomplishing that end. Instead of requiring my father to marry her niece, she arranged with a relative of hers, named Paul Fenton, to state that he had been secretly married to Anita Wilson, and to acknowledge me as his son. This was shortly after my mother's death. Paul Fenton then went abroad, leaving me in the care of my great-aunt. I should like very much to know the exact terms of the compact between those two, but it will never be known, now. The man's statement has never been questioned; to this day it is believed by the Wilsons that I am the son of their cousin Paul, who was lost at sea thirty-five years ago.

"After searching a year or more for Anita Wilson, my father gave up, believing that if she were still alive she must be intentionally keeping out of his reach. He

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had made up his differences with his relatives, and in a short time he married the young lady whom his father had chosen for him. He said that he no longer cared very much what he did. Two years later he received the letter that informed him of my existence. Miss Wilson wrote on her death-bed, where she seemed to realize for the first time how foolish and wicked her whole course had been. Her change of heart came too late to do me any good; it was too late for my father to legitimize me, which he said he would have done if it had not been for his marriage and its responsibilities. He did the best he could under the circumstances — placed me in the care of good people, surrounded me with good influences, and watched over me himself as closely as he dared. He was now proprietor of the family estate, his father having died a short time before.

“After reading my father’s letter, I destroyed it. Having promised to keep the truth from Maia and her brother, I knew I must guard against its accidental discovery. But I felt that I could not honorably conceal it from Constance Lane. She was so well acquainted with my guardian’s family that I dared not give her any details — one half of what I have told you this morning would have exposed the whole situation — so I told her simply that I was not Paul Fenton’s son and that I had no legal right to any name whatever. She was so frightened that I could get nothing from her but sobs and tears. I left her to think it over, but when I went back next day she refused to see me. Her father talked to me instead — she had told him everything — and he

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said that while he would permit Constance to marry me if she wished to do so, he did not feel justified in urging her. He was very kind, but I could see that his feeling toward me had changed. Whatever he might say, he no longer looked upon me as a desirable son-in-law.

"Well! I went away, of course. I left Chicago without stopping to say good-bye to any one, and bought a half-interest in a ranch out here. I had some capital to put into the business; during the years that my father acted as my guardian, he had maintained me at his own expense, a fact which I learned when I became of age and received the full principal and interest of my great-aunt's property. Maia soon found out where I was, and wrote to me. We corresponded for several years, and through her letters I learned of Mr. Lane's death, of Constance's marriage, and then of Constance's death, too. The events were crowded close together, but to me, off there on the range, they seemed unreal as a dream.

"Gradually I got my balance. After the ranch had served its purpose I sold out my interest and travelled for nearly three years; went abroad first, then came back and took a trip through the eastern and southern States, swinging back at last to Chicago. I am not of a roving disposition; on the contrary, I think my sense of location and environment is unusually strong. I wandered here and there because I had such an intense desire to find the one spot on earth to which I could attach myself with the consciousness of being truly at home. I did n't find it in New England—I felt like an

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impostor there, among relatives who accepted me as Paul Fenton's son — and I was no better off in Illinois, among the old schoolmates who knew Maia and her brother. So at last, when I was just on the point of opening a law office in Chicago, I broke away and came back here to the Northwest — I don't know why, unless it was because I had come here, first, in the time of my greatest trouble, and the country had dealt kindly with me. . . . This was twelve years ago. At that time there was more movement in the land business than in the practice of law, so I organized the Rothney Land & Investment Company — and here I am. This is the story, Miss Delamere, and I thank you for listening to it so patiently. I have gone into the circumstances fully because I wish the case to be judged on its merits. My father, though weak and vacillating, was no common scoundrel — he was a gentleman, an aristocrat of the old South. My poor little mother was as well-born as yourself, Miss Delamere. You can understand, as some people could not, what it means to me —” He broke off abruptly, and for a moment held himself in the grip of a desperate silence.

“So, here I am,” he repeated quietly. “My philosophy of life, so far as I've worked it out, is a simple one. Since I am in the world, I must make the best of it. I have tried to take care of my own personal honor; it's all that I have, and my experience has taught me its value.”

He turned upon Alice again, with a look that she never forgot. He read in her white face all that he

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had most dreaded to find there — the sorrow, the pity, the involuntary repugnance — and so great was his love for her that he forgot his own pain in the thought of her distress. "This has been very hard for you," he said gently. "I am sorry."

Her head drooped, the flower-laden brim of her hat hiding all her face except the delicate curve of her chin, that trembled as he looked at it. "You are a brave man," she said, her voice full of tears. "I honor you for the way you have borne this cruel wrong."

He caught her hand and crushed it to his lips. Alice's heart fainted in her bosom as she felt the tense quiver of his kiss through her little silk glove.

"Oh, Mr. Fenton!" she murmured. "You must not think — you must not think that I —"

"Don't say anything! You shall not answer me now."

He drove at a reckless rate along a grassy section-line where no road was, reaching Willow Branch by a seldom used short-cut. He did not speak again until they paused at the door. "Don't be troubled about the future, Miss Delamere," he said. "I think you may trust me. I'll do my best. Good-bye."

Alice ran quickly up to her own room. She pulled off the flower-laden hat and threw it aside; sinking into a chair beside the bed she buried her face in the pillow.

Life "not made for sorrow"? There seemed to be nothing but sorrow in all the wide world. The light of the radiant day had flown.

CHAPTER XVIII

FROM AN OLD PHOTOGRAPH

FENTON returned to his office and attacked the work on his desk with all his accustomed energy and much of his usual cheerfulness. With him, the first essential was to have matters on a definite basis; no problem seemed insoluble if clearly stated, no difficulty appeared insurmountable after its height and breadth had been accurately estimated, and though he had begun his wooing of Alice Delamere by showing her his ineligibility, he intended to proceed as if no such demonstration had been made. She would marry him in spite of the great obstacle, if only he could make her love him well enough.

The possibility that she might already care for some one else had been singularly eliminated from his calculations by the circumstance of having her so much to himself, away from all her wonted associations; yet he knew that the presence of a rival would make no difference in his determination to win her. The thing he dreaded most was the strain that would be put upon his patience—he foresaw that his suit might be a lengthy one. Alice did not love him yet, and she must not be given a chance to reject him while in her present frame of mind. He had nearly lost his head this

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morning; he must take care that such a thing did not happen again.

Strong in the sufficiency of his own great love, Fenton faced the future almost hopefully, while Alice saw nothing but gloom in the gulf that had suddenly yawned between herself and this nameless aristocrat. It was true, as he had said, that she understood his position as few could have understood it; she took his trouble to heart as if it were her own, sharing with him, in spirit, the burden that he had borne alone for eighteen years. She imagined herself deprived of her own pride of stainless lineage, and humbly admitted that she could not have taken up the cross of disherison as bravely as he had. Standing afar, in his courage and his loneliness, he inspired more than pity in her heart; yet there was the gulf between them, dark, impassable. Yesterday she had said, "He must not love me." To-day a new decree went forth—"I must not love *him*."

Three days of wheat harvest had passed. By Wednesday half the small crop at Willow Branch had been cut; at Riverside the gigantic work was being pushed from dawn till dark, accompanied by the chatter of knives, the crack of whips, the shouts of men, while the ripe wheat went feathering over the reels like water over the oars of a galley. Dave Stanley still darted back and forth in his skeleton-cart, issuing mandatory instructions and smoking fine cigars; but the Rothney photographer was no longer in attendance, and Madeline Allingham's guests, having exhausted the novelty

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of harvest, had returned to their match games of tennis. The first division of the five-mile field now contained a central block of wheat so small that the binders compassed it in half an hour; all around, the grain lay snugly in the shock, no more to be buffeted by rain, bruised by hail, or shelled by hot winds.

Mrs. Bowen and Alice passed through Riverside on their way home from a drive, Wednesday evening. "The men are only just quitting work," observed Mrs. Bowen. "I s'pose they'll work late every evening, so long's the fine weather holds. I'll drive up into the field a little piece, so we can watch 'em start for home."

She coaxed Sally into the field, the old mare picking her steps primly through the tall stubble. As a word of command from Mr. Stanley passed from man to man down the line, the binders gradually came to a halt. The drivers dismounted from their seats, some swinging down with the agility of monkeys, others performing the descent with as much awkwardness as could be concentrated in so simple a series of movements. A bundle-wagon lumbered along the line, picking up the scattered shockers, followed by Hans, the machinist, with his kit of tools under the seat of his cart. Hans shadowed the binders like a detective, ready at a moment's notice to arrest any machine that tied its bundles too loosely or shirked its share of the cutting; now that his surveillance was over for the day he put his good little gray cob homeward at a pace that soon left every one else far behind. The wagon-load of shockers was under way by the time the

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drivers, each riding one of his three horses, fell into line. The men were as dumb as the beasts, partly from hunger and weariness, partly from discipline; they rode with no sound but the jingle of harness and the rasp of hoofs in the stubble. Last of all came the master of Riverside, holding his handsome horse well in hand. When the procession struck the road, a cloud of dust hid it from view; back in the field the binders were left alone—motionless, equidistant, some with unfinished bundles trailing over the plate, all with long whips canted at a uniform angle against the crimson sunset sky.

Mrs Bowen made a detour from the field, passing the house by one of the small private roads that were always hospitably open to Dave's neighbors. Madeline's guests were abroad on the close-clipped lawn; at the tennis-court two long-limbed youths were chasing a buoyant ball to and fro across the net, and near the court stood Madeline, shading her eyes with a racquet. Always beautiful, Madeline was possibly loveliest of all in tennis dress, with her cheeks flushed by exercise and her hair roughened by the summer wind. She was not taking part in the game that absorbed the attention of all the others, nor even watching it; she was talking to John Fenton, who stood looking down at her in equal detachment from their surroundings. Fenton was in travelling dress; probably he had stopped at Riverside before taking the train for the State capital. He looked well, and handsome; and as he laughed heartily at something Madeline said, he seemed a man

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without a care in the world. Madeline took a little pink flower from the front of her Peter Pan blouse and put it in his buttonhole. Mrs. Bowen's phaeton jogged on down the road, unobserved by any one on the lawn.

The first effect produced upon Alice Delamere by this brief tableau of John Fenton and Madeline Allingham, was a sudden, frigid anæsthesia of the keen sorrow she had been suffering on Fenton's account. Had she been wasting sympathy upon him? Had she attributed to him finer sensibilities than he really possessed? She put the questions mechanically to her passive brain, until at last the answer came like a flash of returning consciousness, "The facts are not new to him, as they are to me. He has known them for eighteen years."

Alice remained alone on the veranda after Mrs. Bowen had gone into the house. Seated in her favorite corner and looking up through the notched foliage and feathery white blossoms of the wild-cucumber vine at a few stars that were beginning to prick through the pink afterglow, she still reasoned with the disappointment that this new view of Fenton had left in her mind. It was not fair to suppose that he would always rest under the shadow of his hopeless misfortune; hopeless it certainly was, and it would stand forever in the midst of his life, yet there must be moments when the shadow fell away from him, leaving him in the sunshine.

Suppose he had chosen Madeline to be the sole sharer of his melancholy history? Alice doubted if the Allingham standards would have been as strict as her own,

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doubted if they would have prohibited marriage with a man in his position. Perhaps it would have been better if he had chosen Madeline. . . . "Yet he chose *me!*" Alice caught herself back, as from the edge of a precipice, and began to discipline her imagination by a critical review of Madeline's many charms. The daughter of the self-made multimillionaire was the typical product of a typical environment; like the American beauty rose, she had been reared in an artificially tempered atmosphere and perfected in all the graces that are to the human flower what the perfume is to the rose. Alice was equally the product of environment, having grown like a dauntless sweetbrier in the face of wind and weather. Her childhood—motherless, like Madeline's, but lacking the competition of affectionate relatives to repair its loss—had not been free from actual privation; her girlhood had been a high-keyed suspense of soaring ambition and postponed opportunity; and her hard-won literary success had been shadowed at meridian by an unhappy attachment to an unworthy man. She was only six years older than Madeline, but she felt centuries older as she thought upon these things.

Mrs. Bowen was busily ransacking her writing-desk in search of a missing paper, when Alice came in at last from the cool, dewy shadows of the veranda. "I think I will go to bed," Alice said, listlessly. "It is n't very late, but I am tired."

"Then you'd better go, my dear," replied Mrs. Bowen, briskly. Like many other active old people,

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she wore a morning face long after Alice had begun to stifle insidious yawns. "By the way, Alice, we missed Johnny by going out this evening. Christine says he called a little while after we'd left."

"Oh!" said Alice, thoughtfully. "I'm sorry." But in her heart she was glad that Riverside had not been the only place at which Fenton had stopped to say good-bye.

Mrs. Bowen took a framed cabinet photograph from a pasteboard box on the desk, and handed it to Alice. It was several years since she had penetrated to the drawer in which she kept the box. "Can you guess who this is?" she asked, smiling.

A boy's face looked out from the frame—a handsome face, regular and straight-browed, with a thatch of dark hair tossed back in a style of twenty years ago. It had the beauty of youth in its springtime, pure, fearless, hopeful; the strength of manhood and the sweetness of childhood were blended in the firm yet gentle outlines of the mouth and chin; the dark eyes seemed to be looking along an ascending vista toward the summit of all ambition and desire. . . . "Mr. Fenton?" said Alice, softly.

"Yes, John Fenton when he was sixteen. He must've been a pretty boy. I often think how proud of him his ma would've been if she could've seen him like that. She died when he was born—Johnny told me that, once; it was the only time he ever spoke to me about his mother, poor boy."

Alice turned away with the photograph in her hand,

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a strange tenderness for a boy whom she had never seen momentarily sweeping away all thought of the man whom she *had* seen. Then, as she followed the gaze of the pictured dark eyes along the path of the untried years, she found herself comparing the prophecy of Fenton's youth with the fulfillment of his manhood; the one was like a spotless marble image in a sheltered niche, the other like a weathered bronze statue, yet both were informed by an immortal identity that would some day go out into eternity, still unchanged. Wonderful, indeed, that a little old, faded photograph, taken in his sixteenth year, should have given Alice the key to the soul of the man — not the carelessly smiling man in the jaunty travelling-cap, with the pink flower in his buttonhole, but the real John Fenton who had chosen her, out of all the world, to know him as he was.

"I should think it must have been a good likeness at the time," she said, gently laying the photograph on the drop-leaf of the desk. Her eyes were bright with tears.

"Johnny gave it to me because I took such a fancy to it," said Mrs. Bowen. "I told him I did n't think I ought to have it to keep always — it's the only one he's got, taken at that age — but I told him I'd keep it for him till he got married, and then I'd give it to his wife. Johnny said that would be about the same as a ninety-nine-year lease. But I'm ready to hand it over, any time." She detained Alice's hand in hers, looking up at the girl with an expression that would

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have invited confidences, had there been anything to confide. Alice silently left a good-night kiss on Aunt Julia's soft, rosy cheek, and slipped from her sight up the shadowy stairs.

CHAPTER XIX

THE BRINK OF THE UNKNOWN

FAR in the depths of the following night Alice was awakened by Mrs. Bowen's voice at her door. The voice spoke twice before it broke the spell of slumber.

"Alice, do you hear that queer noise?" Mrs. Bowen was inquiring when the sleeper finally aroused.

The words, and the portentous tone in which they were uttered, were enough to paralyze a timid woman. Either Miss Delamere was not timid, or she was not fully awake; she unhesitatingly slid out of her little white bed and came across the room, pushing her rumpled curls back from her drowsy eyes. "I have been asleep, Aunt Julia, and I have heard nothing," she said. "What kind of noise was it?"

"That's what I can't make out," said Mrs. Bowen in a troubled tone. "I can't tell what direction it comes from, either. Hark! There it is again!"

Alice listened. "Oh, it is right here in the house!" she exclaimed. "It is Chan — coughing."

"Mercy on us! It can't be! You don't really think it's that, Alice?" Mrs. Bowen hurried back across the hall to her own room, and threw on a flannel wrapper, while Alice lighted a candle. "I never heard a human being cough like that," she said solemnly.

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"It sounds like acute bronchitis," said Alice. "I'll dress as quickly as I can."

Mrs. Bowen hastened down the hall, her candle flaring. She found Chan tossing under a twisted counterpane and blanket that had dragged loose from the foot of the bed; his face was livid, he breathed in short gasps. Mrs. Bowen straightened the covers and plied him with questions which he made no attempt to answer. "You'd ought to've waked somebody, Chan," she was saying as Alice entered the room. "The idea of you laying here like this, with nothing done for you! If you'd pounded on the wall at the head of your bed, you might've waked Christine. He's cold as ice," she announced to Alice. "The first thing is to get the chill broken. You run down stairs and light the fire to heat some water for the bottle, while I get him wrapped up in a blanket. And I guess we'd better wake Otto and send him right off for Dr. Crane."

Alice nodded, pausing an instant to look at the boy. His feet still moved restlessly under the tucked-in covers, and the hand that lay on the counterpane kept opening and closing. His lips were drawn backward and his nostrils inward by the agonized effort that each shallow breath cost him. "It is acute bronchitis," said Alice.

She ran down to the kitchen and lighted the gasoline stove. The shelf-clock seemed to tick louder than ever at this intrusion upon its nocturnal monologue; the hands pointed to half-past three. Alice unlocked the back door and sped across the yard to the men's lodging-house, a building which in the palmy days of Willow

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Branch had sheltered a dozen farm-hands. Otto Erickson now lodged there in solitary state, and apparently he slept well; several moments elapsed before his dishevelled flaxen head appeared at a window in response to Alice's knocking.

"Ya-a," he drawled cautiously, at the conclusion of her rapid and explicit statement of the case. "Dann I skall go efter da doctor?"

"As quick as you know how!" said the young lady, sharply. "Get ready at once, and drive fast."

"Ya-a. I drive fest," said Otto, nonchalantly, drawing in his head. His temperament was static, and not easily galvanized, but Alice's imperative tone produced some effect; Otto surprised himself by the celerity with which he made his simple toilet and harnessed his horse.

For half an hour Alice assisted Mrs. Bowen in applying such simple remedies as were available for the relief of Chan's suffering. "Do you s'pose," said Mrs. Bowen, racking her brain for further expedients, "that it would do to give him—a little liquor?" She spoke in a hushed tone, as became a prominent member of the W. C. T. U. "I've got some whiskey left in a bottle—some that we had for Mr. Bowen when he was sick."

"Yes, it would be good for him," said Alice. "I recollect that when my father had bronchitis the doctor gave him strong stimulants."

Mrs. Bowen left the room, returning presently with a bottle which Chan eyed askance as the loose colt

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eyes the halter and the measure of oats that invite his capture.

"I won't drink the infernal stuff," he said distinctly.

"Oh, hush!" chided Mrs. Bowen. "Such language! Why, Chan —"

"Let me give it to him, 'Aunt Julia," suggested Alice. "If I am to help take care of the unruly young man, I may as well begin at once."

"Well, p'r'aps you'd better pour it out — I can't see very well without my spectacles. Mercy! You're not going to give him all that?" she protested, as Alice measured a portion of the sparkling amber fluid into the glass. "It's enough to kill him."

"It is less than half what the doctor used to give my father."

"It'll choke me," gasped Chan.

"No, it won't," dissented Alice, calmly. "Take a good breath, and don't try to swallow too fast. There! That was n't so bad."

The boy made a wry face over the fiery dose, looking up at Alice with a half-defiant, half-friendly smile.

Mrs. Bowen went about the room, setting chairs straight, shutting the bureau drawers, all of which were more or less ajar, and picking up Chan's clothes, which the lad had left as usual in an untidy heap. Chan watched her as she shook out the garments and hung them away, and when his shoes disappeared behind the closet door he wondered dully if he would ever wear them again. Alice was quietly improvising a paper shade for the small glass lamp on the bureau.

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"Now, Alice, you go to bed," said Mrs. Bowen in a brisk undertone. "There's no need for both of us to be up at once. Well, if you'd rather take your turn now I'll go and lay down, but I shan't be sleeping very sound — you can easy wake me."

On her way through the hall Mrs. Bowen paused to open the window opposite Chan's door, and finding the spring-catch refractory she called Alice to her assistance. "I just b'lieve," she whispered as they pulled on the sash, "that Chan went swimming to-day, and that's the way he got this chill. He came late to supper, and I noticed then that his hair looked soaking wet. I did n't think much about it, s'posing he'd been at the shack all afternoon. He and the other boys have boxing-matches, and the way they maul each other 'round is a caution. I wonder that Johnny will allow it, but he don't seem to care how much Chan fights so long's he takes a boy of his size. Maybe they'd been boxing, and Chan got overhet and then chilled. Still, that would n't get his hair wet."

It seemed impossible that Chan could have heard the low-spoken words, yet he fixed a gaze of startling intelligence upon Alice when she returned to his bedside. "I went swimmin'—this afternoon," he murmured between hard breaths. "I was — in the swimmin'-hole — at five o'clock."

"Why did you do such a thing, Chan? You knew better."

"I — know better — now. Mr. Fenton's told me — I might get my death — that way, but I thought it

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was — all talk. I guess — he was right — after all. I guess — I *have* got — my death.” The boy’s long-fringed gray eyes searched Alice’s face in dumb appeal.

“You must not think that,” she said, laying her hand lightly on his forehead. “It is possible to be very ill, dangerously ill, and yet to get well. Were you boxing with Arne and Aleck this afternoon?”

“No. What made you think I was?”

“Mrs. Bowen thought you might have had a bout with one of the boys.”

“No, we did n’t fight to-day. We went swimmin’ instead.” He pulled on his laboring chest and fetched a slightly deeper inspiration. “We had a Jim-dandy mill last Saturday,” he said in a more natural tone. “I licked Aleck McDonald clean out of his boots. Knocked him out in two rounds and gave him a nice black eye and a bloody nose. Gee! He bled like a stuck pig.”

“Charming! What did Aleck think of it?”

“Oh, he did n’t mind. He knew ’t was a fair fight. His brother Con was there, and Arne and ’Gus, and a bunch of fellows from town, and they all said ’t was a fair fight.” Chan tugged again at his over-taxed intercostal muscles, but this time his lungs gave no response. The glory of the fight with Aleck swiftly faded from his mind, chill dread taking its place. “Oh, I’m afraid to die!” he moaned through his set teeth. “Oh, I’m smotherin’! Take this old blanket off of me!”

He struck out furiously against his wrappings. Mrs. Bowen never did things by halves; when she undertook

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to wrap Chan in a blanket she did it thoroughly, winding him about, arms and all, like a mummy.

"Wait — I will loosen it for you," soothed Alice. As his thin hand came free she took it firmly in her own. "You must try to keep quiet. You will find that you can breathe much more easily if you lie perfectly still."

She put her disengaged hand behind her, drew forward a chair and sat down, holding Chan's fingers in a steady clasp. His effort to obey her injunction resulted in rigidity shaken by an occasional convulsive tremor; his head swam, strange tinglings crept along his limbs. Numbness stole over him; the hand that Alice held seemed the only part of his body that was still alive.

"I'm afraid to die," he repeated, clenching his teeth to keep them from chattering. "It's all so queer, and dark. I would n't mind if I only knew what it's going to be like afterwards."

Alice considered a moment before replying. Though disposed to hope for the best she knew that Chan's condition was alarming; the boy was indeed hovering on the brink of the Unknown. She surmised that his acquaintance with his own soul was anything but intimate. The principles of morality and square dealing drilled into him by his guardian, and the spiritual instruction received in the course of his enforced attendance at Sunday-school, while good so far as they went, were hardly equal to the present emergency; and as she realized that it devolved upon her to say the word that

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should strengthen the wings of this feeble young soul for its flight, it was little wonder that she paused.

"Did you ever hear a soldier tell of his experiences in war?" she asked.

"Sure," panted Chan. "Lots of old guys come to our school on Decoration Day and hand us out a string of yarns about the war." He stared gloomily at Alice, as if unable to perceive the relevancy of her inquiry.

"They are always interesting yarns, are n't they? I have heard many good, brave soldiers say that they were often badly scared before they went into battle, but that as soon as they got out on the firing-line their fears left them. I think we are all alike in that, Chan—we fear things most at a distance. The fact that you feel afraid to die, just now, seems to me a very hopeful sign. You may be sure that when the time really comes you will not be in the least afraid." She smiled cheerfully, smoothing the counterpane across his fluttering breast.

"Would n't you be afraid to die?" Chan demanded keenly.

"I hope that I shall not be when my time comes. I shan't try to cross the bridge before I get to it, though. You see, serious illness does n't always mean death. Death comes once to each of us, but it cannot come more than once. Last Winter I had a dangerous illness myself, and one night I was so low that the nurse thought I was dead. They called it being 'at death's door,' but it was really nothing of the kind. I am six months nearer death now than I was then, but then I

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was ill and now I am well. Besides, there are other and better reasons why we should not be afraid to die. I am sure you know some of them, Chan."

As Alice went on speaking in a few quiet words — so few that it seemed incredible they could express so much — Chan listened as to a message wholly new. When the fundamental principles of religious faith had been presented to him in his Sunday-school lesson he had usually felt that he was expected to take a great deal for granted, and had often rebelled against believing what he did not understand; the sweet simplicity of Alice's manner said "*I believe*," and to Chan's little heathen mind, as to the mind of heathen the world over, the repetition of the *Credo* was more convincing than the most ingenious apologetics of theology. He lay quite still, feeling the comfort of a mysterious, unseen presence in the room.

Suddenly a spasmodic cough seized him, a cough in attempt merely, striking his parched throat like a blow on a drum-head. He lay back after the paroxysm, his lips blue, his forehead cold with sweat. "I s'pose," he gasped slowly, "if — if I've got to die, it won't be — much worse than this — is."

"Bronchitis is generally worst at the beginning of the attack," said Alice, drawing a soft little handkerchief across his damp brow. "I know something about it. Once my father was ill just as you are now."

"Did he die?"

"No, indeed. He recovered very soon."

"Has Otto gone for the doctor?"

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"Yes, some time ago."

"I wish he lived nearer!" groaned Chan. He had great faith in the gruff old physician, who had had a general oversight of him during the past two years and had prescribed many a bitter tonic which Chan usually forgot to take at the specified intervals. "Where are you going?" the boy asked anxiously as Alice arose from her chair.

"Only down stairs for a fresh glass of water," she replied. "It is time you took some more whiskey."

His eyes followed her from the room and were on the door when she returned. "Don't go away again," he begged. "I can't bear to be alone." He raised himself on his elbow and drained the glass that Alice held to his lips; then he fell back on the pillow, turning his head away with a look of more than physical disgust. Visions of Park Valley, and of his own wretched life under the roof of drunken Tim Donahue, rose with the pungent fumes from the glass. "It is infernal stuff," he muttered. "I don't see how anybody can drink it for fun."

"Nor I. But you are drinking it for business, and it is doing you good. You must not call it hard names."

The truth of Alice's words found corroboration in the grateful warmth that stole over Chan's benumbed body. "I do feel better, sure thing," said the boy. "That grip on my throat is letting up a little. I wish Mr. Fenton had n't gone away."

"He will soon be back. Burnside is not so very far from Rothney."

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"It takes an awful while to get there, though. You have to go to Grantham, and change cars, and then to Pierpont, and change cars; it takes a whole day to get there. I wish he was home. I'd like to see him — again. I want to tell him I'm sorry I broke my word to him. 'T was only the other day he told me he liked the way I've been behavin' lately, and here I had to turn 'round and sneak off to that old swimmin'-hole, where I'd promised I would n't go no more this Summer! Guess it ain't any use for me to try to keep my word — I always slip up on it sooner or later."

"There would be very little good accomplished by anybody if people stopped trying every time they slip up. Talk frankly with Mr. Fenton when he comes back. He will do everything in his power to help you."

"If he was like you, it'd be lots easier to talk to him."

Alice smiled. "Mr. Fenton is one of the best men that ever lived," she answered, "and he is the wisest, truest friend a boy could possibly have."

Chan nodded, his lips twitching. "I guess that's right," he said. He closed his eyes, perhaps to hide a tear, opening them again with a quick blink. "I wish you'd go to my bureau," he said, "and take out a box that you'll find layin' on top at the right-hand corner of the second drawer. The lid ain't fastened on, so be careful you don't drop it off."

Alice complied. She found the drawer crowded with materials for wood-carving, from the midst of which

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she extricated the box, holding the loose lid in place. "Shall I bring it to you?" she asked.

"No. You can look at it there."

The improvised lamp-shade threw all the light of the lamp upon her face as from a lantern-slide. Lying back in the shadow Chan watched the dawn of interest and pleased recognition in her look.

"Why, it's the wild rose, the wild prairie rose!" she exclaimed, examining the design on the top and sides of the box. "And you have carved it in bass-wood—the very thing we were talking about! Did you make it for the State Fair? Oh, Chan, it's *fine*!"

"State Fair nothing!" retorted the boy with scorn. "I made it for *you*."

"For me?"

"Uh-huh. Was n't that all right? Don't you like it?"

"Of course I like it—I think it's beautiful, but I did not dream of your making anything so elaborate, or giving it to me. It must be the most difficult piece of carving you have ever done."

"Oh, it was n't so very hard," said Chan, assuming a mendacious indifference to conceal his gratification.

Alice returned the box to the drawer, more deeply touched by the spirit of Chan's work than by the mere fact that it had been done for herself. Here was no deformity, no bitten golden-rod, no writhing serpent; for once the boy had wrought a design of positive beauty, and had brought to its execution a skill that came little short of genius.

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"I thought maybe you could use the box to keep handkerchiefs in, or veils," he said when she sat down beside him once more. "And each time you took one out, you'd think of — of Rothney, and the wild roses you picked off the prairie."

"Thank you, Chan."

The words alone would have repaid him for all the hours he had spent in carving those fine lines, but when she bent and pressed to his thin cheek a kiss that was softer than the petals of the wild rose itself, Chan felt that he would like to make that box all over again and see if he could n't do it a little better. The poor lad who had early learned to associate the name "mother" with a vague sense of shame and a fierce desire to fight somebody, and had later acquired from his observation of Mrs. Tim Donahue a violent detestation of all woman-kind, was receiving from Alice Delamere his first revelation of the Ideal Woman, in comparison with which every girl of his acquaintance would probably be measured until the Real Woman arrived.

"The box ain't quite done," he said presently. "I'd 've liked to finish it, but maybe you can use it the way it is. It would n't be much of a trick to put the hinges on — Mr. Fenton could do that."

"You will finish it yourself, my dear, as soon as you are strong enough."

He smiled and closed his eyes. His faculties were becoming slightly obscured by Mrs. Bowen's "liquor," but he fought against the drowsiness that crept upon him, fearing that if he slept he might lose the little

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courage he had mustered for the encounter with Death. Partly to keep himself awake he remarked, "I told Mr. Fenton, 'bout two weeks ago, that I was making a little present for you. I did n't tell him what it was, but I told him I needed a better knife to finish it, and he bought me *three* of the dandiest knives you ever saw!"

"Chan, you're sleepy! Why don't you take forty winks before the doctor comes?"

"Afraid I'll choke."

"Nonsense! I shall be right here, and I will watch you every minute. If you choke, I'll wake you." Alice took out the pillow that felt like a wad of heated cotton under the boy's head, and slipped in another that was like a cool fluff of down.

"Thank you — that's bully," sighed Chan; and clasping both his hands around hers, he fell asleep.

Dr. Crane arrived at dawn, soon after Mrs. Bowen had returned to Chan's room. Alice went down to admit the doctor; weary and anxious as she was, she drew new hope from the pure, fresh brilliancy of that radiant August morning. The whole earth was covered with a glisten of thick dew; shocks of silvered wheat drooped in the whitened harvest-fields and the bushy flax was hung with ropes of gleaming pearls. The sun burst from the mists of dawn, triumphantly resumptive, sending its red rays like a new life-current through the tingling atmosphere. Illness and death could have no part in such a glorious renewal — surely Chan could not die on such a morning.

Dr. Crane came in through the kitchen, in accordance

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with rural custom. "Good morning, Miss — ah — m-m-m," he said cheerily. He remembered meeting Alice on one or two occasions, but had quite forgotten her name. "A fine morning, but cold for the season — very cold." He pulled off his gloves and rubbed his strong, freckled hands. "I am sorry I was so delayed in getting here. I was out at the Perry farm when your man came after me, and I could not leave immediately. Well, what has that rascal Chan been up to now?"

"He went swimming yesterday and took cold," said Alice.

"Swimming!" The doctor glared from beneath his beetling gray eyebrows and then went on rubbing his hands in silence. After he had restored the stiffened joints to their normal flexibility he extracted a bulky round package from the side pocket of his coat. "Set this can of antiphlogistine in hot water for five minutes and then bring it up to me," he said. "We must put a pneumonia-jacket on the boy." He caught up his medicine-case and stalked toward the back stairs, leaving Alice to follow as soon as she had executed his order. He was taking Chan's temperature and talking to Mrs. Bowen about the weather and the harvest when Alice came up stairs. Chan, only partially awake, lay staring stupidly at the ruddy light that streamed in at the windows; the doctor had pushed up the shades, and the room was filled with the glory of the sunrise.

"What have you done for him, beside the external applications?" Dr. Crane inquired.

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The two doses of whiskey were duly reported by Alice.

"Right," nodded the doctor. "Give him the same quantity again at six o'clock, and every two hours thereafter. Got plenty of it in the house?" He winked wisely as he examined the meagre supply. "Ah, yes, I'd know that was Mrs. Bowen's bottle," he said. "She's a hard drinker — her bottle is always empty." This was an ancient joke of Dr. Crane's; he shook with laughter as he met the widow's unsmiling look. "I'll 'phone Sandy McDonald to send you over a little Old Scotch from his private demijohn; it's better stuff than they give you at the drug stores."

"Well, if you think the boy must have it, doctor," acquiesced Mrs. Bowen, her gravity deepening at the mention of the demijohn. From that moment her loud-voiced, rosy-faced Scotch neighbor was a marked man in her estimation.

Dr. Crane turned toward Chan as if suddenly recollecting that there was such a person in existence, and energetically took the thermometer from beneath the lad's tongue.

"I ain't got any fever!" blustered Chan as soon as the gag was removed.

"Oh, no, certainly not," replied the doctor with bland irony. "Who said you had?" He carried the thermometer to the window, frowning as he read its record. He superintended the application of the pneumonia-jacket, and he left three kinds of medicine, with detailed directions which Alice wrote upon a tablet. "You

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have no telephone in the house, I believe? Well, I'll stop at Nelson's and tell them to send Arne over at noon to see how Chan is, so they can call me up. I will not come again until evening, unless it should be absolutely necessary. Good-bye, Chan. Behave yourself. Good morning, Miss — ah-m-m."

Mrs. Bowen accompanied the doctor down stairs. She came back a few minutes later, wiping her eyes. "He's afraid the poor child won't pull through," she whispered to Alice, outside Chan's door.

"Then with all due respect I think he is mistaken," said Alice. "I have been very anxious about Chan through the night, but I think he seems better now. I believe he can be pulled through by care."

"Dear, dear, I don't know! It's a lot worse than it would be if he had ord'nary health to start with. Dr. Crane says that if he is n't decidedly better by noon he'll be in for a run of pneumonia, sure. And of course Chan would n't stand a ghost of a chance with pneumonia."

Alice set her lips. "It is n't noon yet," she said stoutly. "What is to be done about sending word to Mr. Fenton?"

"The doctor said he'd send a wire as soon as he gets back to town. Johnny always puts up at the Grand Hotel at Burnside, so he'll be sure to get the message some time. Now, Alice, child, you go to bed. You look used up. You'd ought to've waked me sooner."

Nothing but the thought of the strain that must be borne during the next twenty-four hours would have

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drawn Alice from Chan's bedside at this time, but she knew that she must rest now if at all. For several reasons she felt that the chief responsibility fell properly upon her; she believed that her perceptions were quicker and her endurance better than Mrs. Bowen's, while to the absent Fenton, whose guardianship of Chan she understood as no one else could possibly understand it, she felt the obligation of a self-appointed representative. For Fenton's sake, no less than for the sick boy's, she must conserve the strength that was to pull Chan through the coming crisis. Obtaining a promise from Mrs. Bowen to call her at seven o'clock, she went to her room, and drawing her window-curtains close to shut out the dazzling radiance of the morning, she resolutely composed herself to sleep.

CHAPTER XX

“ONE OF THE BEST MEN THAT EVER LIVED”

THE noon report from Chan was such that Dr. Crane postponed his visit until evening, at which time he found his patient's condition improved far beyond his expectations. “Well, well!” he exclaimed. “I never saw you pick up so fast as this. At the present rate we'll soon have you around the corner.”

Chan smiled, with a glance toward Alice that referred his betterment to its cause. He was still very weak, his head was far from clear, and his pneumonia-jacket gripped him like a shirt of mail; there was only one position in which he could get enough breath to keep him going, but he cheerfully lay in that one position hour after hour, mysteriously happy and content. The fear of death had receded like the memory of recent shipwreck; the hope of life surrounded him like the calm of a haven.

“I have not yet received any word from Mr. Fenton,” said Dr. Crane as he rose to leave. “I think he expected to go on to Wickersham first, and back to Burnside afterwards, and if he did so the message might be delayed several hours in delivery. Fortunately the case is not so urgent as it appeared at first. No, Chan is not out of danger,” added the doctor, when

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questioned by Alice at the close of his visit. "He has a fighting chance. That's about all that can be said as yet."

"Would it be better to have a trained nurse?"

"H-m — Hardly necessary, I think. You are handling the case admirably. The boy is safe in your hands, provided you are equal to the strain."

"I am equal to it," said Alice, confidently. "I am very strong."

The doctor shrugged his shoulders and laughed, but did not dispute her claim. He knew human nature well enough to recognize the value of soul strength and he knew the human body well enough to read the signs of pure though fragile health in Alice's clear eye and erect bearing. "Well, if we find that it is too much for you, we can get a nurse from Grantham," he said kindly.

The evening shadows fell peacefully over Chan's little haven. The darkness had lost its terrors for him; he knew that wake when he might, at the dead hours of night when fear is strongest and life is feeblest, he would find Miss Alice close at hand. It was an exquisite evening, fit close of a day that had begun with such glorious promise — a lingering pink sunset jewelled with early stars. It was the evening of Madeline Allingham's party at Riverside, and as usual, both wind and weather favored Madeline. "You'd 've gone to that party if it had n't been for me," said Chan, gazing at Alice in mournful apology. "I was a chump to get sick."

“One of the Best Men”

“I would rather be here than at the party,” replied Alice. She was leaning back carelessly in a rocking-chair, with the manner of a visitor who had dropped in casually to keep Chan company; yet not a flutter of the lad’s breath nor a momentary tension of his pale face escaped her observant eye. He did not suspect how closely he was being watched; he thought only of how pretty Miss Alice looked in her fresh white muslin frock, and marvelled that she could seem so animated after being awake so many hours.

The “hoe-down” at Riverside developed into an elaborate social function the like of which had never before been seen at Rothney. The illumination of the house and grounds shone far and wide; the rooms were decorated with ripe grain, one hung with festoons of drooping, buff-colored oats, another with bristling yellow barley, a third with purple-brown flax, a fourth with golden wheat. “Yes, Madeline’s attached pretty much the whole crop,” said Dave in reply to admiring comments upon the decorations. “She always gets what she goes after. No such thing as stoppin’ her.”

The object that Madeline had chiefly “gone after” in the present instance had been a matter of deep anxiety to both her aunts. The act of combining elements so incompatible as the simple flower of village society, the over-sophisticated younger set of the twin cities, and the breezy youth of a dozen prairie farms, spelt disaster in the timid judgment of Mrs. Stanley. Miss Peck, though keenly apprehensive, pinned her faith to

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Madeline's unique gift for accomplishing the impossible, and in the end this faith was justified. Madeline, who had but just begun to realize her innate power as a leader, found leadership as fascinating as stock speculation had been to Loudon B. Allingham, the broker's clerk, thirty years ago. She invited the most unlikely guests, as her father would buy up quiescent securities; she manipulated events on Wednesday evening, as he would manipulate a bearish market, and after all was over she swept success into her coffers with all a gambler's triumph. Among the guests from Rothney was Philander Armstrong; he was attired in irreproachable evening dress, he talked well, wisely refrained from dancing, and altogether appeared to excellent advantage; and as Madeline sat through three dances with him, it is safe to assume that he carried away a sense of triumph nearly equal to hers.

Receiving Dr. Crane's telegram after several hours' delay, John Fenton started at once for home; but his train was delayed by a wash-out west of Pierpont, and it was late Saturday evening when he reached Rothney. He went directly to the doctor's office and obtained a history of Chan's illness, after which he rode out to Willow Branch. He was met at the door by Mrs. Bowen, who reported that Chan's improvement had continued through the day and that the boy was now "sleeping like a top."

"This has been a great burden upon you and Miss

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Delamere,” said Fenton, gravely. “I only regret that I could not have been here to share it with you.”

“Oh, we’ve got along real nicely. Of course, we’ve been anxious, but Chan’s been as good as pie, and real easy to take care of.”

“How is Miss Delamere standing it?”

“Better than I’d’ve s’posed she could. She’s had the whole care of Chan at night, and I’ve looked after him during the day. I did n’t like to let her sit up so much, but she wanted to do it, and Chan has seemed quieter with her than with me. I sent her to bed an hour ago. She asked me to wake her at three o’clock, but if Chan keeps on as well’s he started out, I guess I won’t wake her at all.”

“In that case I should think I might take care of the kid, Mrs. Bowen, and let you get some rest, too. I am good for all night so far as keeping awake is concerned, and if necessary I can make up for it to-morrow — Sunday, you know. Tell me what is to be done, and leave Chan to me.”

Mrs. Bowen demurred at first, but finally agreed to let Chan’s guardian take charge, with the understanding that he should call her at three o’clock. By the time the hall-clock had measured out twelve mellow strokes upon the stillness of the house, Fenton was seated alone beside the sleeping boy, listening to his sharp, irregular breathing. The only other sound in the room was the blended ticking of two watches — his own in his pocket and Alice Delamere’s on the table beside the

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medicine program. Fenton gently took up the little timepiece that Alice had substituted for Chan's clattering alarm-clock, and compared it with his own watch; they agreed to a second.

He was shocked by Chan's altered appearance — the perceptible hollows in cheek and temple, the spasmodic twitching of the black eyelashes, the dry pallor of the parted lips, through which the breath, after remaining suspended for several seconds at a time, would come with a catch and hurry over a dozen shallow inhalations, only to falter and fail as before. Fenton had slight knowledge of illness, either by experience or by observation, and it was difficult for him to believe that this weak, wasted little body could be really faring as well as Dr. Crane said — though of course it was Crane's business to know. One thing that the old doctor had told him Fenton accepted without question — the boy's life had been saved by Miss Delamere's watchful care.

Roused by something unfamiliar in the vigorous thrust that tucked the blanket around his shoulder, Chan stopped tossing on his pillow, and opening his eyes drowsily he beheld a figure several sizes larger than the one he was accustomed to seeing in the subdued light of the night-lamp. His look widened with a flash of glad recognition. "Mr. Fenton!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, Chan, I'm here at last. You're all right — go to sleep again. Hold on, though; you must take some medicine first." Fenton turned up the light, consulted Alice's program, and administered the dose according to directions.

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“You’ve been a long time getting home,” said Chan.

“Longer than I wished. I was very sorry to be away from you, my boy.”

“It’s all my own fault that I’m sick. I—I went swimmin’.”

“So Dr. Crane told me. It has been a tough lesson, has n’t it? You would n’t listen to warning, so you had to learn by experience.”

“I thought sure I was goin’ to die. Guess I would’ve died if it had n’t been for Miss Alice. She held on to me.”

Fenton did not reply.

“I tell you, there’s nobody like her!” continued the boy. “She always knows what you want without bein’ told, and I don’t believe she ever gets sleepy. No matter how often I’d wake in the night—the nights’ve been awful long—there she’d be, sittin’ up as perky as if ’t was noon, her eyes as wide open as a doll’s. She never fusses, and she talks right out so you can hear—no whisperin’. And she’s so good to a fellow! Gee! I don’t see how anybody could help gettin’ well, with her to take care of ’em. Mrs. Bowen has been awful good to me, too, but there never was anybody like Miss Alice.”

Still Fenton was silent; yet his silence gave assurance of a sympathetic audience. Chan had long since observed that his guardian “liked Miss Alice pretty well,” and lately he had noticed that the two spent less time together than before, and that the sunset drives had apparently been discontinued. But for the new gratitude

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that he felt toward every one who had been kind to him, he might not have troubled himself to inquire whether or not the course of true love ran smooth for John Fenton; now, out of the fullness of that gratitude, he offered an unexpected piece of information.

"Mr. Fenton, Miss Alice thinks you are one of the best men that ever lived."

Fenton stirred slightly in his chair. The dimness of the room hid the color that swept his face; after a moment he arose and crossed to the open window, where he stood looking out into the night.

"Gee-whiz!" thought Chan, aghast. "I didn't s'pose it would make him *mad*!" His sensations during the next few seconds were paralleled only by the emotion with which, on Fourth of July, he was wont to await results after lighting the fuse of a giant fire-cracker.

But apparently Fenton's sentiments were non-explosive. He returned from the window and sat down again, throwing one arm across the back of his chair; and as he contemplated the thin, sharp little face that stared at him from the pillow, a distant smile hovered beyond the immediate gravity of his expression. "Now, Chan, I want you to shut up and go to sleep," he said concisely.

"Y-yes, sir."

Chan's tone was becomingly meek. He drew his right hand from beneath the pillow and shyly held it out toward Fenton, who took it at once in a grasp that completely swallowed up the lean little claw. All

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through the forty-eight hours just past, Chan had been trying to decide what he should say to Fenton on his return, tentatively framing confessions of past faults and promises of future good behavior; but as he felt the warm, sufficient strength of his guardian's hand-clasp the crudely prepared phrases were forgotten; he fell asleep happily, sure that Fenton understood.

Fenton found no difficulty in keeping awake during the silent hours that followed, and when the time arrived for arousing Mrs. Bowen he decided not to disturb her. The dawn came upon him at last, as he sat plunged in the profound passivity of long-continued vigil; and as the increasing gray daylight traced out the pictures on the wall and outlined the objects in the room, he arose to extinguish the feeble, superfluous ray of the small night-lamp. He heard a slight sound at the half-open door; turning, he saw Alice — a dim little figure against the purple of the dawn.

She drew back a step on discovering Fenton where she had expected to find Mrs. Bowen. He came forward quickly and joined her in the hall outside the door. The amethyst light of an east window shone behind her; her face had a primrose freshness and fairness; her eyes were bright from long and dreamless slumber. Fenton's heart throbbed heavily as he took the hand she frankly held out to him.

“When did you get home, Mr. Fenton?” she asked.

“Late last night, after you were asleep. I persuaded Mrs. Bowen to let me take her place. There has not been much to do. I have given Chan his medicine

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every two hours, but he has slept most of the time in between. He is resting quietly now."

"Aunt Julia was to have called me at three o'clock. I am ready for duty, now. You must let me relieve you."

"It is hardly worth while, Miss Delamere. I am sorry that you came —" He paused; he was *not* sorry that she came, any more than he was sorry that a new day was breaking upon the shadowed earth. "I should have reached Rothney yesterday on Number Five," he went on, finding speech safer than silence, "if it had n't been for that wash-out. The delay occurred several miles from nowhere — not a team to be had, and nothing to do but sit still and wait for the track to be relaid. I felt very impatient, and very anxious. Dr. Crane has told me how you devoted yourself to the care of Chan. The boy owes his life to you."

"I have done only my share. Aunt Julia has done her part, too, and Chan deserves great credit for the effort he has made to get well. He has shown real courage. It is easy to be brave when one is not afraid, but he *was* afraid, and he conquered his fear nobly."

"Yes — with your help! He would be a bad lot, indeed, if he showed a cowardly spirit in the face of such brave and generous goodness as yours. You have brought out the best that is in him. I hope he will remember it and appreciate it; but at least you know that *I* appreciate it, and that I thank you from my soul for all you have done to help this poor little outcast —" Fenton's tone had been gathering passion as he spoke;



“Don’t you know better than to tempt me like that?” he said
huskily



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the momentum of unuttered meaning rushed on through the silence as he abruptly paused.

For once discretion forsook Alice. “I did it partly on your account,” she said, yielding to the sweep of his emotion. “I—I tried to take your place.”

Instantly she was dismayed by the effect of her words. Fenton started forward. She felt his arms enfolding her; she looked up with a little gasp, putting both her hands against his breast. He withdrew at once, repulsed not so much by her touch as by the startled look in her uplifted eyes. He stepped back a pace, his breath coming quickly, his mouth hard as iron. The light of the east window had brightened from amethyst to carmine, and in its rosy glow Alice stood and blushed, with downcast eyes, like a chidden child.

“Don’t you know better than to tempt me like that?” he said huskily.

“Oh, I did n’t mean—I’m sorry. Forgive me.”

She spoke hurriedly, half inaudibly, without lifting her eyes. Then she vanished from his sight down the dim corridor.

He returned to the room in which Chan quietly slumbered. He flung himself into a chair beside the open window and looked out blindly, unconscious of the sweet morning breeze that fanned his flushed and knotted brow. He felt cut to the heart. He vowed that come what might, Alice should never have another chance to shrink from him like that.

CHAPTER XXI

PHIL ARMSTRONG TAKES COMMAND

CHAN'S convalescence progressed rapidly, his own patience and cheerfulness greatly assisting his recovery. Fenton spent all the time at Willow Branch that could be spared from the office of the R. L. & I., and his daily meetings with Alice were sufficiently free from constraint to pass Mrs. Bowen's observation unchallenged.

The Monday following Fenton's return from Burnside, Editor Armstrong of the *Advance* made an early morning call on Rothney's newly-appointed mayor at the office of the R. L. & I. "Very busy, Mr. Fenton?" he inquired, striding lightly into the general manager's private room.

"No more than usual. Sit down, Phil."

Armstrong closed the door to the outer office and took the chair at the end of Fenton's desk. "Mr. Fenton," he said, with a quick squaring of his lean jaw and a granitic flash of his gray eyes, "something has got to be done, and done right away."

"That's a safe general proposition," said Fenton. "Have a smoke."

Phil absently accepted a cigar from the silver case that Fenton snapped open and held out to him.

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"There's a movement on foot," he began, "to fabricate public sentiment against you, Mr. Fenton, and the ex-Honorable Edward Kenney is at the bottom of it. The Kenney members of the council voted for your appointment because their boss ordered them to do so, and now that you're in, they'll begin their mud-throwing. In fact, the *Tribune* began last week, in that very ambiguous third editorial — about the water-works bond, you know. I'm prepared to answer it editorially — I've got a leader ready that will knock considerable wind out of Tommy Stone, but before we go much further I'd like to know exactly what line you're going to take with these fellows, yourself."

"Well, I can't state my plans in detail as yet, but I intend to give the city a publicity administration. Nothing is to be done in a corner, and if Kenney and his men want a fight they'll have to come out into the open. It may be a hot time, Armstrong. I may say I look forward to it with interest."

The editor gazed speculatively upon the mayor for a moment, then leaned forward, exclaiming, "Fenton! If you want a hot time, why do you waste your energies here in Rothney? Go in for something worth while! Go before the primaries as candidate for Congress! You'll win out — not a bit of doubt of it. With the federal patronage you already command, and with a hot-shot newspaper campaign to cinch the votes — give *me* the newspaper end of it, and I'll pump the Hartshorne combine so full of daylight that it won't hold together until the primaries, let alone till election — you

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can beat any man that Old Nick puts up. Oh, I know what I'm talking about. I've got a line on each one of the Congressional possibilities, and I know just where to attack each man's position. I tell you, it's only due to yourself that you should get into the campaign this year and beat a few of these fellows at their own game. How else, allow me respectfully to inquire, are you ever going to get the upper hand of Kenney and Turnbull and the Consolidated Implement Company and the Yakima Lumber Trust?"

"The Yakima Lumber Trust?" repeated Fenton skeptically.

"Yes," replied Phil, shortly. "You've got Loudon B. Allingham to reckon with no less than Jim Turnbull and Nick Hartshorne. Kenney is merely a tool of the august triumvirate, but he's in a position just now to make himself very useful. He has forced you into the mayor's office at a time when the city's affairs are in a disgraceful muddle; he is going to put every possible obstacle in your way, hoping to bury you here and now under the *débris* of your own failures. Speaking as an instructor of the masses and a moulder of progressive opinion, I protest against the wanton waste of such good Congressional timber as yourself."

Fenton reflected for several seconds before replying. "It suits me very well to be mayor of Rothney, just now," he said. "Though it's possible that I might be elected to Congress, I should be thrust into office by the concerted action of a few strong minority leaders; I should be comparatively unknown to my constituents

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and altogether obscure to my colleagues at Washington ; I should cut no figure in the House, and would be retired at the end of my term. Now, I think a representative should represent ; when he raises his voice at the national capital it should be recognized at once as the voice of the commonwealth that sent him there, and no man is ripe for federal service until he has made himself identical with the special needs and interests of his own State. I'll go to Washington, if at all, as a personification of those interests." He checked Phil's eager interruption by a gesture. "I know I've accomplished something along this line, but it is n't half enough to suit my ideas. I'd rather be governor of my own home State, personally known to everybody in it, than to be Speaker of the House of Representatives."

"But there's no chance of making you governor this election!" protested Phil. "We can't go back on Starkey."

"Of course not. I'm not a candidate. But after I'm through with the things I intend to do here in the city of Rothney, I may go in for the governorship. It will be that rather than Congress. This is not for publication, by the way. For the present the mayor's job is as much as I can attend to without neglecting my business. Moreover, it's work that appeals to me strongly, non-partisan work founded on bed-rock principles of common sense and civic honesty. You see, I look upon office-holding as a means, not an end ; if a certain office gives me power to do things that I could n't do as a private citizen, I'm willing to seek office,

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willing to tackle any job of public service that I'm fit for. But I shall never make politics a profession, and no party boss or party organization will ever put the bit in my teeth. So there you are, Philander."

Armstrong put his hand to his brow with a faintly-whispered, "*Where* am I?" and then grinned dryly, running his fingers through his hair. "If you don't give me a red-hot issue that I can use in annihilating Tommy Stone," he said, "the *Advance* may perish of *ennui*."

"Boost Nels Christianson for attorney-general."

"Too dead easy!" scorned Armstrong. "His election will be a walk-away. He's got the Scandinavian vote solid, and as for the Wardell faction —"

Dick Harvey entered with a sheaf of typewritten letters to be signed. Armstrong leaned back and enjoyed the flavor of his cigar while Fenton affixed a score of signatures in a vigorous chirography singularly legible despite the fact that capitals and small letters were all nearly the same size.

"By the way, I did n't come here this morning to talk to you about running for Congress," observed the editor after Dick had withdrawn.

"No? Then my little speech, declining the nomination, was thrown away? Too bad."

"What I came for was this." Phil leaned forward in his chair. "I want your authority for a plan I have to bring the people of this burg together in a common cause. I want to get up a rousing town meeting the like of which has never been seen before."

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"What kind of meeting? This is no time for a political rally."

"It may be presumptuous for a tenderfoot like myself to remind a pioneer that on Monday the twenty-sixth, one week from to-day, Rothney will celebrate her twelfth birthday anniversary."

"Oh! That's quite true, but you know we gave up the public celebration some years ago because the attendance was so uncertain. The date coming in the midst of harvest has made it difficult to get the people to turn out."

"Naturally. The crop being light this year, and early, the rush will be letting up by next week. My idea is to have the meetings in the opera house. I understand that the meetings used to be held in the town-hall, but that is n't half big enough for *my* crowd. We'll frame up a program of speeches that will lift the roof; I've my eye on Judge Wilton to give a history of Rothney, Senator Christianson to lift the veil from its future, and Mayor Fenton to tell us about its present. This will give you and Christianson a chance at the voters and will make the occasion a political rally in effect though not in name. We'll make it festive, too — have flags, and decorations, and music by the band, a social reunion after the program, and refreshments served by the ladies. Now, I don't know what your opinion may be, but I may say, in all modesty, that I think I've got a great head — shaping up this scheme all by myself."

"No doubt of that, Phil. Nobody has ever

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discounted the size of your head; 'great' and 'big' are the only words to describe it. Have you consulted the senator and the judge?"

"No. I came to the mayor, first of all, to get the freedom of the city. I want a clear field for my operations."

"It is very short notice; but that may be no disadvantage. Yes, Phil, the freedom of the city is yours. It will be necessary to bring the matter before the council to-morrow evening; there will be no opposition, I am sure. I like the plan, and the more I think of it the better I like it. You must be extremely careful in the appointment of your committees. And I need not remind you that I shall expect to have all the important arrangements referred to me."

"Sure, your honor! Now I'll go see the judge and Senator Nels and then hike down to the office and get some dodgers printed. This thing has got to be well advertised, and the advertising won't stop at the town-limits, either. It's going to be the best lark I've had in years!" Phil sprang to his feet with a joyous laugh.

"What about Ed Kenney? Common courtesy requires that he should be invited to take some part in the celebration, if only to ornament the platform with his presence."

"He may be invited with impunity, because it will be impossible for him to accept."

"How do you know that?"

"He has a prior engagement," said Phil; and an

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unconscious impulse of clever mimicry gave to his manner a suggestion of the impressiveness with which the Honorable Edward himself would decline the invitation. "He is to address a meeting in Rainsford next Monday night. I figured in this fact, along with my other calculations."

"It is certainly fortunate that he cannot be here," said Fenton, smiling sympathetically at the impish mirth that danced in Phil's gray eyes. "Have you heard anything about this Rainsford meeting?"

"Nothing definite, but I suspect that it has to do with the county-seat business."

"Most likely. Your choice of spellbinders for the occasion is very well made. Judge Wilton is the one for historian; he knows everything that has happened in Rothney from the time the first stake was driven in the town site, and he can tell a story as well as any man I know. Christianson is sure to make good wherever you put him. As for myself—" Fenton laughed shortly. "Confound you, Phil!" he ejaculated. "You have given me the hardest job of the three. It will be extremely difficult to make an acceptable speech on present conditions in this town."

Phil slid his hands into his pockets and rocked nonchalantly back on his heels. "Well, that's all right, isn't it?" he retorted. "You said just now that you were willing to tackle any job of public service. It didn't occur to me to offer you the easy end of *this* job." He walked across the room; pausing before he swung the door to its usual position against the wall

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he said significantly, "Your speech, Mr. Fenton, will be the 'gist and centre-point' of the occasion."

Phil's plan not only received the unanimous approval of the council — it took the whole community by storm. During the strenuous week that followed, the editor of the *Advance* recruited more volunteer assistants than he could well provide with tasks, but with admirable tact he managed to give every one something to do.

"It's going to be the biggest outpouring of civic enthusiasm ever seen in Penfield County," declared Phil jubilantly, as he and Mayor Fenton walked down Main Street together Saturday afternoon. "For once, we've got Rainsford beat a mile." He chuckled. Rainsford, the county-seat, had long been Rothney's successful rival in most kinds of municipal enterprise. "Strange coincidence, is n't it, that Rainsford should be holding a town meeting on the same night? Great pity. Got your speech written, Mr. Fenton?"

"No. I never write my speeches."

The editor's face fell. "But you've got an outline of it ready?"

"No. As I am to be the last speaker, I shall have to adapt my remarks somewhat to what has gone before, and —"

"I can give you Christianson's dope to study up —"

Fenton waved aside the suggestion with a laugh. "Don't want to see it. You attend to your end of this business, my boy, and I'll attend to mine."

"Then I'll have to depend on a shorthand report for the *Advance*," said Phil, in a slightly displeased

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tone. "I'll put Dick Harvey on the job—he's so used to grabbing your words of wisdom that he won't be likely to let many of them get away." He knew better than to tell the mayor point-blank that he ought to have written his speech, committed it to memory, and rehearsed it before a looking-glass, but he felt the first real misgiving that had assailed him in connection with the anniversary project. Never, in all his reportorial experience, had he heard a genuinely extemporaneous address that compared favorably with written discourse, and the present case was not one in which to take chances. A full typewritten copy of Christianson's prophecy, which would roll forth on Monday night as spontaneously as if the formation of its thought were one with its utterance, had been on Armstrong's desk since Thursday.

They had paused on a corner. Phil, shifting his position to accommodate a man who was shovelling a heap of broken brick and pine shavings from the sidewalk into a wagon, glanced up and perceived that they were in front of the new Methodist Church. "Oh, hello!" he exclaimed. "I want to step in here a minute and see how they're getting along with the sanctuary; I lack a few points for my Friday write-up. Come on in, Fenton."

The church had reached the final stage of interior finish; through the polished oaken doors, swinging smoothly outward on their ornamental wrought-iron hinges, came a pungent odor of varnish and a subdued sound of small hammers tapping on hardwood. Phil

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sprang up the steps at a run ; Fenton followed more deliberately, halting just inside the door while Phil proceeded to the farther side of the auditorium. With the interest of a part-owner Fenton looked about the room. Though not a church member he was classed among the Rothney Methodists, and this new First Church was certainly his by virtue of his generous financial support — even his in a somewhat higher sense because it was the church he attended if he went anywhere. He saw that the work had gone forward rapidly since the last time he looked in upon it ; the slat partitions of the classrooms now rolled in their appointed grooves and the oak pews, massed at one side of the auditorium, were all ready to be placed in semi-circular rows after the slightly sloping floor had received its final polish. Above the choir-loft arched an empty alcove in which a pipe organ would be built as soon as the necessary funds could be raised ; the Rothney Methodists had a record on paying for things as they went along, and they had proudly agreed to use their shrill little cabinet organ a few months longer. Just now, in the warm shower of crimson and purple light that poured through the window above the entrance, the bare alcove outshone the artificially decorated walls on either side. The new pulpit desk stood swathed in white cloth ; it was the most expensive item in the church equipment — carved simply from solid heart-of-oak — and it was John Fenton's personal gift to the congregation. When asked if he wished to make it a memorial to some member of his family he had gravely replied in the negative ; but it may be that his heart made a silent,

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solitary memorial of sorrowful pity for the young mother who had borne him as the price of her own frailty, at the cost of her own life.

Fenton remained standing near the door, looking up at the rainbow glory that shone upon the shrouded pulpit desk, while Phil Armstrong talked briskly with the carpenters who were installing the communion-rail. To Fenton's mind there came a fresh realization of the sublimity that inheres in the consecration of common things; he reflected with renewed satisfaction that the materials for this modest house of worship had been worthily chosen from the best of their kind, and that there had been no expense spared on the construction. A similar thought may have occurred to the mind of Armstrong, who remarked to Fenton as they passed out into the street, "A dandy little church. Not an inch of shoddy about it anywhere. As soon as they get this rubbish cleared away from the front I must bring over my camera to take a picture for the *Advance*. There'll have to be some lively hustling, if the building is to be ready for dedication a week from to-morrow."

"It will be ready," said Fenton, with the easy confidence of one who furnished a considerable portion of the motive power for the work.

The Methodists turned out in force next day to attend their last service in the grand opera house. Neither sermon nor long prayer contained the remotest reference to the new church. The Reverend Ralston Dodd never conducted himself like any other minister under any given set of circumstances; he was of a fervid yet

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ascetic temperament, aggressively cheerful in tribulation, restrainedly sober in prosperity. Some of his people had almost resented his soaring superiority to misfortune at the time their little old chapel burned to the ground; this morning, when he rose to read the notices, they knew that they were to be prohibited from soaring, now that their turn had come.

"Dear friends," he began, speaking with a long pause after each short phrase, "as you all know — we shall — on next Lord's Day — God willing — assemble for worship — in our new church building. When we gather there — to dedicate the result — of the labor — that has engaged our time and thoughts — for so many months — let us remember that the Almighty — dwelleth not — in temples made with hands. Let it be ours — to dedicate ourselves — on that day — remembering the fact — that *we* shall remain — long after this little temple of wood and stone — reared in His name — shall have crumbled into dust. Let us not glorify the material evidence — of our faith — at the expense of — the living spirit. In the building — of this church — we have been wondrously prospered. It has been a labor of love — brotherly love. Not one dispute — not one hard feeling — has marred the harmony of our work. The Lord has watched over us — and overruled our mistakes." Mr. Dodd held up the notice-slip and in a tone less measured and tense he announced a hymn. "Following the singing of this hymn," he said, "Brother Samuel Buzby, chairman of the building-committee, will read a short report."

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"Worship and thanks to him belong,
Who reigns and shall forever reign"

sang choir and congregation to the sonorous melody of Duke Street. Then Deacon Buzby arose from his seat in the front row and faced the people with a beaming smile, unfolding the crisp linen paper that he drew from his pocket. His voice was thin and his enunciation sibilant; it is doubtful if any one was much the wiser for the reading of his report, but fortunately the figures were already known. "You see from this report, my friends," he said, crossing his hands behind him and surveying his brethren with shrewd, twinkling eyes, "that we shall go into our new buildin' without a dollar of debt. Without a dollar of debt. The church buildin' is paid fur, the lot it stands on is paid fur, the fixin's is all paid fur. It's thur'ly insured agaynst fire. If 't was to burn down termorrer we could start another buildin' next week."

A thrill of appreciation ran through the throng, already unbending under the secularity of Mr. Buzby's address. Men who had given freely of their substance held themselves in the clasp of their folded arms and looked up modestly at the deacon; women who had worn themselves out with bazars and entertainments turned and nodded at each other with congratulatory smiles. Feeling that a debtless church was a theme fit for the utmost elaboration, Mr. Buzby went on, his manner growing pompous, his prominent white waistcoat throwing forth the glitter of his gold watch-chain as he talked. He was a good and zealous laborer in the cause

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for which he stood, but he honestly believed that the First Methodist Church of Rothney had earned its blessings by its own superior efforts. Suddenly there was a pause. Mr. Dodd arose, extending his hand level with his shoulder. "Brother Buzby," he said. His tone was low and even, yet at the words the deacon started, turned a glance of comical apprehension toward the speaker, and abruptly sat down.

Mr. Dodd stepped to the front of the platform, his hand still extended. "My friends," he said, "let us unite in singing Coronation!"

The hymn was not on the service list. Mr. Dodd's eccentric departures from program were, however, well known to the pretty young girl who played the organ. Before the minister finished reciting the first line, the girl had her hymnal open at the right page; the organ broke forth promptly in a reedy blast. Above the rustle of the rising congregation Mr. Dodd's voice rang out again as he caught two more lines from the midst of the hymn and flung them at the people:

"Go, spread your trophies at his feet,
And crown — *him* — Lord of all!"

All sang — those who could sing and those who could not. The chorus drowned out the blare of the organ, surged through the open windows, and filled the quiet street; and Brother Buzby sang as lustily as any one.

This Sunday was the first day that Chan had spent down stairs since his illness. He insisted upon sitting

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up until Fenton came in the evening, but collapsed with weariness soon after the arrival of his guardian, who immediately took him up to his room and put him to bed. Chan found that his ambitious excursion upon the highroad of convalescence had left him aching with fatigue; he stretched himself luxuriously on his soft little couch, exploring the smooth sheets with his toes. "Gee!" he sighed. "I was gettin' darn tired of this old bed. But I guess it's a pretty good old bed after all."

Fenton stayed and talked to him until he saw that the boy's mind was peacefully riding at anchor off the coast of dreamland. As he rose to leave he laid his hand on Chan's forehead with a firm, gentle touch that was like a benediction. "Good night, son," he said cheerfully. Chan lay listening to the echo of the words in his mind while his sense of hearing reached after the man's retreating footstep. "Son!" His guardian had never called him that before. Chan had not supposed that the name could have so pleasant and welcome a sound.

Alice had gone for a drive in the Allingham touring-car, with Madeline and Miss Peck; she had not returned at the time Fenton left, though he purposely lingered half an hour after coming down from Chan's room.

"Alice and I are going to the anniversary meeting, Johnny," said Mrs. Bowen. "The Nelsons have asked us to drive into town with them, and Arne will stay with Chan. I don't think we need hes'tate to leave Chan with Arne, now he's so much better. 'Gust says the

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meeting will be a big affair; he says everybody is looking forward to your speech."

Fenton was at the door, his hand on the latch. "Well, I hope 'everybody' will not be disappointed," he replied. "I have a few things to say that may not please everybody."

The evening express had just trailed its pennant of smoke along the northern horizon as Fenton rode into the electric glare of Main Street. In addition to a few persons returning from Grantham, the train had left one passenger who was evidently a stranger,—a young man, not much past thirty, who appeared to be on the best possible terms with the universe and who viewed his surroundings, while crossing the station platform, with the sincere graciousness of one whose own superiority is too well established to need assertion. His gray traveling dress was of loose, easy English cut; his suit-case was well covered with European pasters.

"Lookut the dude!" whispered one irreverent by-standing urchin to another.

Pursuant to information given him by the station-agent, the stranger turned his steps up Main Street toward the Hotel Kenney. At the corner of Third Street he met John Fenton, who was crossing from the livery stable in which he had just left his horse. Fenton seemed absorbed in his own thoughts; he was passing the stranger without a glance when the latter stepped forward and held out his hand.

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“Why, Jack, old man! Won’t you speak to me?”

Fenton stopped with a start like the recoil of a spring. For an instant his hand hung at his side before he lifted it mechanically to accept the stranger’s proffered grasp. “*Fred!*” he exclaimed.

CHAPTER XXII

"WE ARE MEN OF HONOR"

HAVING restrained Alfred Beverly from registering at the Hotel Kenney, John Fenton took him home to his own comfortable quarters on Bellevue Avenue. Sitting on Mr. Leroy's front porch and smoking one of Fenton's favorite *San Pedros*, Beverly accounted for himself in a vivacious monologue that left Fenton free to recover from the shock of his old friend's unexpected appearance. Had Beverly been less accustomed to find welcome wherever he went, he might have questioned whether Jack was glad to see him, but no such doubt troubled the popular lecturer, social favorite, and idol of literary clubs; that Jack should *not* be glad to see him was unimaginable.

"You will get a letter from me to-morrow or next day," he said, laughing. "You see, I originally intended to look you up after filling my engagements at Grantham. I had an impression that Rothney was much farther west than it is; you were in the western part of the State when you first came here, were you not? So I thought. Well, when I found that by staying on the train half an hour longer I could make Rothney to-night and still get back to Grantham for my lecture at ten-thirty to-morrow morning, I could n't resist the

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temptation to run in upon you unannounced. I was sure you'd forgive me. And I shall make a point of getting back to Rothney in time for the grand demonstration that is to take place in your opera house to-morrow evening. I understand that Mayor John Fenton is to be the chief speaker of the evening.”

“Where on earth did you hear that?”

“On the train. Two of your worthy citizens boarded the parlor car at Grantham, and I heard them discussing the affair. I could n't very well help hearing what they said, and I confess that when I caught your name I pricked up my ears. It was immensely diverting to hear so much late news about Jack Fenton, friend of my boyhood! Let me see — it must be five years since we last saw each other.”

“More than that. It was in the Summer of nineteen-one.”

“That's right,” agreed Beverly after a moment of reflection. “It was shortly before I went to New York to take charge of the ‘Modern View.’ And we have n't sent each other so much as a post card since. Oh, it's heathenish to let old friendships lapse in such a way! Really, friendship is more at the mercy of propinquity in this age of rapid transit than it used to be in the good old days of the stagecoach. Theoretically it is easy nowadays for people at a distance to keep track of each other, and for that very reason it is n't done practically. We have no time for any one but the men and women whose interests are daily bound up with our own.”

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"We must try to keep our interests a little closer in future. What are your engagements, after these lectures at Grantham?"

"None, until next week, in St. Paul. I can stay with you several days if you want me, Jack." The winning self-assurance of Beverly's expression carried Fenton's memory back twenty years.

"Of course I want you, Fred," said Fenton, with an affectionate cordiality that not even his own sharp anxiety could repress. "The longer you stay the better I shall be pleased. Where do you make your headquarters now? — still in Manhattan?"

"Yes, at the Redwood Club. I am on the wing most of the time, though. Last year was a very busy one and I was completely done up by the first of June. I've been loafing through England and Wales until about three weeks ago — the best vacation I ever had. If you ever get tired out with the Western-American pace, go to the mountains of Wales; they'll make a new man of you. I expect to make my first regular tour of the West, later in the Fall; this present trip is not a part of the season's work; I am taking the measure of western audiences now — getting plans of their fortifications, so to speak."

"Do you often get back to Hillcrest?"

"Oh, no. I have been back only once since I sold out. You didn't know that I had sold Hillcrest? Strange! I should have thought that Maia would mention it in some of her letters, if she still writes to you."

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Fenton slowly straightened back in his chair; the hand that held his cigar dropped at his side. “Sold Hillcrest!” he repeated. “You have *sold* the estate that has been held by your family for eight generations, the lands that your father would not have parted with on any consideration —?”

“Precisely,” Beverly struck in. His clear-cut cameo profile seemed to take a harder outline. “Times have changed since my father’s day. It was all he could do to make ends meet, even while he still had his faithful old freed slaves to work for him. The generation of freedmen has passed away, and the negro laborer of to-day, in that part of the South, is like the worthless undergrowth that springs up after good timber has been felled. Oh, I’m no advocate of slavery; the institution was obsolete long before it was abolished, but the life of the old manor has unfortunately perished with it.”

“Did Maia consent to the sale?”

“‘Consent’ is hardly the word. She yielded to the overwhelming logic of facts. She might have saved Hillcrest by marrying Hal Rutherford — we all expected she would do so, you remember. When she rejected him and decided to share the wandering fortunes of an army officer, she forfeited all right to dictate the disposal of the property. At least, so it seemed to *me*,” Beverly added, with an air of urbane self-withdrawal that cancelled the arrogance of his former tone. The phrase was a favorite of his, and had made him many friends in the domain of literary criticism;

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his keenest shafts of arbitrary opinion went straight to the mark when aimed with this backward bend of the bow, and people who might otherwise have disagreed with his views to the end, were won over by the suave afterword, the bland admission that only "so it seemed" to Alfred Beverly. "Maia opposed my wishes and judgment until Guy was ordered to the Philippines; then she told me to go ahead and do as I thought best. I regret to say that we were not on very good terms while the discussion was in the air. It certainly was n't my fault, though. Like most women, my dear sister was unreasonable."

Having summed up the case in these words, Beverly went on placidly smoking his Havana, while Fenton's cigar, still dropped at arm's length, paled to a dull gray ash.

"I wish I had known how you were situated," said Fenton at last. "I might have advanced you the money to put things in shape."

"I should n't have taken it, old man, though I thank you just the same. My object was to wipe out debt, not to transfer it. I sold to my mother's cousin, Clay Archer, which was a shade better than letting the property go entirely out of the family. It reconciled Maia in some degree to know that our old home was to be occupied by people of our own blood."

Fenton struck the ash from his dying cigar, and raising it to his lips he brought it back to life with a few strong puffs.

"You must not infer that I acted hastily, or think

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that I am wanting in regard for family traditions,” Beverly went on. “Parting with Hillcrest was the most painful necessity I have ever been called upon to face. But it was inevitable. I saw how the dear old place was running down, and I knew that the one thing needful to rehabilitate the establishment was not family pride, but cold cash. Clay Archer had the cash. You are a practical man yourself, Jack; you must admit that I acted for the best.”

“I understand your position, Fred. Nevertheless, if you had taken me into your confidence, I should have helped you, somehow, to keep Hillcrest. You are the only one to perpetuate the family name; some day you will marry and settle down, and then — Do you suppose Archer could be induced to convey the property back to you?”

“I hardly think so. It would take a small fortune to buy it back with all the improvements he has made — roads, retaining walls, bridges, fountains, hothouses — it’s an enchanted garden in these days! He has added a wing to the house, too.”

Fenton shook his head sadly. “I would rather see it as it used to be,” he said.

“Well, to tell the truth, I would rather see it so myself. But what’s the use in repining?” Beverly shrugged his shoulders half impatiently. “Rothney seems to be an ambitious little town,” he remarked after a pause. “I suppose when you came here it was all trackless prairie, the haunt of the moose, the buffalo, and the noble red man.”

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Fenton did not reply for a moment, and when he did emerge from silence, his mind still engaged with the subject that Beverly had dropped, he spoke absently. "The town had been started before I came, but it had n't developed much," he said. "The Rothney Land & Investment Company has practically made it what it is."

"Your company?"

"The one of which I am general manager."

"Do you ever think of going back to Chicago?"

"To live there? No. I am established here, and pretty well known in the land business through the Northwest. Even if I wished to make a change I could n't afford to risk it. When a man gets to be forty, about the safest thing he can do is to keep on."

"Why did you leave Chicago in the first place, Jack? You have never told me the exact reason."

"I can't discuss my reason, Fred. You will have to take my word that it was sufficient."

Again, Beverly placidly smoked for several moments; then, "She was n't worth it, Jack," he declared. "Poor little Constance! You knew that she died within a year after she married Will Waring?"

"Yes. Maia wrote me about it."

"By the bye," said Beverly, a new note of animation in his tone, "can you tell me whether Miss Alice Delamere, the novelist who created such a furore as 'Sarah Gray,' is still in this part of the world? Her publisher told me that she has been spending the Summer on a farm near Rothney."

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Fenton whirled sharply on the speaker. “You are acquainted with Alice Delamere!” he exclaimed.

Beverly met Fenton’s challenging look with a characteristic backward toss of the head. “Certainly I am acquainted with her,” he replied. “Is it incredible that I should be? Miss Delamere and I are old friends.”

Fenton sat motionless for a moment, then turned away, dropping his forehead upon his lifted, clenched hand. “My God!” he muttered.

Beverly watched him, utterly astonished by his emotion yet fully alive to its probable meaning. Jealous self-interest took alarm; his cool blood ran quicker through his veins. “Does this mean,” he inquired with slow and pointed emphasis, “that Miss Delamere is in Rothney?”

Mastering himself with an effort, Fenton raised his head, leaned back in his chair, and looked full at his friend. “She is here,” he said briefly.

“And you have met her?”

“I have seen her nearly every day for the past two months.”

“Really? I congratulate you upon your good fortune, though it robs me of the pleasure of introducing you to her.”

The two men confronted each other, Beverly losing as Fenton gained in grasp of the critical situation, though as yet both were outwardly cool. The silence was broken by Fenton, in a question that gave Beverly a temporary advantage.

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"Fred, when and where did you first become acquainted with Miss Delamere?"

"She was my assistant in the office of the 'Modern View,'" Beverly answered deliberately. "She was, in fact, my editorial better-half. Her talents and mine were complementary, and we worked with one heart and soul. Congenial friends from the start, we soon became — lovers." Beverly felt, rather than saw, that Fenton flinched at the word. "We had been engaged for some time when a misunderstanding arose between us over a small matter in connection with the management of the magazine. Alice possesses remarkably good business judgment, for a woman, but she was wrong in this case and I was right. I found that I could n't make her see the matter in its true proportion; yet being unwilling to quarrel with her I waived my contention and adjusted the affair according to her wishes. Of course I hoped that this would make things right, but it did n't. Alice broke the engagement. I think I can say that I took my dismissal like a gentleman; I have never felt, however, that it was final, and I believe that if I go about it in the right way, I can win her back again. This is what I intend to do — confidently expect to do. Will you wish me God-speed, Jack?"

Beverly sprang up and held out his hand, smiling with a fair measure of his usual assurance. Fenton also arose, but instead of taking the offered hand he laid both his own on Beverly's shoulders, gripping him tight. He spoke in short sentences, breathing hard. "You

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confidently — expect — to win her back — No, boy, I can't wish you God-speed. You understand why. No need to multiply words. We understand each other.”

Beverly saw that he had scored. His daring assumption that Alice still cared for him had been accepted by Jack, a clear indication that Jack knew he had no chance himself. “I have stated my position so frankly that I think you should do likewise,” he said. “Where do you stand?”

“Exactly where you stand yourself,” rejoined Fenton squarely. “I love Alice Delamere, and I wish to marry her.”

“But you admit my prior claim?”

“I admit nothing! The final word must be spoken by Miss Delamere. I have only this to say — her happiness is of more consequence to me than my own. If it can be demonstrated beyond doubt that you are the man to make her happy, I'll stand aside and give you a chance. But it's up to you, Fred. You'll have to *prove* your ‘prior claim’!”

Fenton relaxed his hold on Beverly and turned away.

“Oh, this is a complication!” murmured Beverly, pulling off his eyeglasses and passing a shapely hand across his brow. “I would n't have had such a thing come up between you and me for anything in the world. You must know how it distresses me, Jack.”

“Why should it come between us?” retorted Fenton with a touch of hauteur. “We are men of honor, and we can depend upon each other to play fair.” He drew in his breath quickly, flinging back his broad

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shoulders; then with one of his abrupt readjustments of manner he took his watch from his pocket, looked close at it in the pale, diffused light of the arc-lamp that hung across the middle of the street, and said quietly, "It is getting rather late. Shall we go in, Fred? I think Mrs. Leroy has your room ready for you."

Fenton ushered his guest up the steep carpeted stairs to the large, formal front chamber opposite his own. "Jack," said Beverly, as they bade each other good-night, "it seems very strange that you knew nothing of my acquaintance with Alice. Has she never mentioned me? "

"Never."

"Have you spoken of me to her? "

"No."

Beverly laughed off a faint mental sensation which in another man might have been chagrin. "An odd combination of circumstances, is n't it? " he said lightly.

"Quite unique, I hope," replied Fenton. "I should be sorry to think it had a parallel."

They shook hands, and Fenton withdrew. Left to himself Beverly soon recovered his normal complacency. "Poor old Jack!" he thought with a smile.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE ANNIVERSARY MEETING

BEVERLY wrote a note to Alice next morning and intrusted it to Ole Carlson for delivery. Usually Carlson was the most trustworthy of messengers, but for once his memory played him false, and the note lay in his pocket until evening. Alice was starting for the anniversary meeting, in company with Mrs. Bowen and the Nelsons, when the belated message reached her; it ran as follows:

"My dear Miss Delamere:

"Having strayed into this remote corner of the world to harangue a few teachers' institutes and literary clubs, I cannot go away without letting you know that I am here. May I call upon you some day this week? I go to Grantham this morning to put in a full day at the State Educational Association—two lectures, a luncheon and a reception—but shall return in time for the meeting at the opera house, where I hope to see you. While in Rothney I shall be the guest of my old friend, John Fenton, with whom I am renewing acquaintance after many years.

"Faithfully yours,

"ALFRED BEVERLY."

"Are you ready, Miss Delamere?" Mrs. Nelson's voice struck in upon Alice's hurried perusal of Beverly's message. "I'm going to let you sit in front with my husband. I don't often let a young lady sit beside my husband, but I'll risk it this time."

Alice dropped the note on Mrs. Bowen's desk and

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went out to take her place in the front seat of the victoria. It was well for her, in the sudden distraction of her thoughts, that Mr. Nelson did not deserve the reputation for dashing gallantry that his wife always gave him; he was, in fact, a staid and rather quiet person, and for most of the drive to town he had nothing whatever to say. He conveyed his little party to the opera house much earlier than was at all necessary, impelled by his own suspense and trepidation. He had been appointed chairman of the anniversary committee, and as such it would be his duty to preside this evening. He would have ingloriously declined the honor, but for the urgent counsel of his wife, who felt far more elated over his preferment than he did, and far more confident in his ability to wield the gavel.

"My, but we *are* early!" said Mrs. Nelson, who was the first of the party to accomplish the ascent of the precipitous wooden stairway. "'Gust, I guess your watch must have been fast." She fluttered forward and peeped into the auditorium, across an expanse of eight hundred empty chairs in close-set rows. Only about half the lights had been switched on; the upper sash of each window had been lowered in anticipation of heat and smother, but thus far the air was so chill that the ladies were fain to keep their carriage-wraps around their shoulders. The discolored plaster walls of the barn-like room had been generously draped with bunting, and at each side of the proscenium hung a large silk flag. The dilapidated drop-curtain had been raised, and the stage set with the least shabby of its three

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scenes — the forest-glade with the purple castle in the upper left-hand corner, which had figured impartially in productions of "East Lynne," "Strongheart," "Romeo and Juliet," and other favorite dramas, until it had become as familiar to the average Rothney citizen as the topography of his own front dooryard. Six hardwood chairs, and a table with a pitcher and glass upon it, flatly contradicted the abrupt perspective of the forest-glade; on the floor below the stage, at one side, stood a group of music-desks.

Philander Armstrong came springing up the stairs, followed by Dick Harvey and young Westcott, who were to assist him in ushering. "We beat you, Phil!" chirped Mrs. Nelson. "We thought we'd be here in time to get the very best seats."

"That's right," said Phil, breezily. "First come, first served." He strode into the check-room opposite the stairs and threw off his light top-coat, disclosing a new Tuxedo with waistcoat and necktie of pale gray silk.

"Mm-mm-mm!" murmured Mrs. Nelson to Alice in a subdued circumflex of admiration. "Don't he look swell!"

Phil returned and shook hands all around. He certainly did look well in the new Tuxedo, and his manner sparkled with the dynamic energy that ran his tireless mental machinery. "Want me to see if I can find you a seat anywhere?" he said gayly to the ladies. "You're going to wait here for the rest of the bunch?" he added to Mr. Nelson, referring thereby to the other

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members of the august sextette that was to occupy the stage. He ushered the ladies into the auditorium, and after seeing them placed to their satisfaction he stood beside them in the aisle, chatting with Alice Delamere and watching Dick Harvey handle the advance-guard of the audience, which had begun to arrive in small detachments. Phil nodded to all newcomers, and addressed most of them by name; he had lived in Rothney less than two years, but already his speaking acquaintance in the community was more comprehensive than that of the oldest inhabitant. Suddenly Alice saw his keen expression soften and his granite-gray eyes flash with a new light; he excused himself and walked back toward the centre door, through which several persons were now entering. Following him with a glance, Alice was not surprised to see Madeline Allingham halting provisionally just inside the entrance — beautiful Madeline, sheathed in a pale blue gown that was the color of moonlight on drifted snow.

Madeline took rapid note of Phil's appearance as he approached, and there was approval mingled with her charming air of *camaraderie* as she gave him her hand. "You see I changed my mind, Mr. Armstrong, and decided to stay over until Wednesday," she said, replying to his look of joyous inquiry.

"And here I've been imagining you half way to Minneapolis!" He held her hand for an instant in a wiry grip that made her wince. "Did you really stay over for the meeting?"

"For that — and for other things." She laughed

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at his fierce young earnestness; yet with all her tantalizing coquetry she felt a touch of timidity that was never wholly absent from her feeling towards him. If any one had asked her whether she really liked Philander Armstrong, she would have been as likely as not to answer in the negative, but there could be no doubt that the young man had acquired a certain definite sway over her imagination. "Aunt Maisie and Uncle Dave are on the way," she went on, with a glance over her shoulder. "They took the stairs more slowly than Aunt Belle and I did. Aunt Belle has gone out to the kitchen with her cake. She baked an *adorable* angel-cake; you must be sure to get a piece. So sorry that my father can't be here. He's back from the coast, but he got no further than Rainsford; he telephoned at six o'clock, saying that he had consented to address a town meeting there. Perfectly stupid, I think! Why can't they arrange these town meetings so that the dates won't conflict?"

Why, indeed! Armstrong received the information conveyed by Madeline's prattle, with a flash of super-intelligence but without comment. "So — the 'Holy Harmonizer' has been called into the county-seat brawl!" he thought. At this moment Mr. and Mrs. Stanley joined them, and Dave took charge of the conversation. Miss Peck presently returned from the kitchen in which the ladies of the refreshment committee were already mobilizing the coffee-boiler and counting the cakes and sandwiches, and Phil conducted the Riverside party to seats in the middle section of the hall.

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The sound of voices had swelled to an inarticulate babble; the noise of ascending footsteps on the stairway steadily gained in volume. The ushers darted back and forth like shuttles, carrying the human warp into the woof of empty chairs; Dick Harvey, who was short of stature, went on tip-toe to survey the tightening fabric and to make sure that no single vacant seat was left like a dropped stitch in the midst. Alice Delamere turned, resting one slender round arm on the back of her chair, and looked over the rows of smiling faces and the swaying lines of new arrivals. Why did n't Fenton come? If only she might speak to him before Alfred appeared, she fancied that her own course might seem plainer. Or if by any chance Alfred should miss the train from Grantham, that would be better still.

All the past day Alice had been looking forward to this anniversary meeting with vaguely blissful prescience. She had selected her hat and gown with the utmost care; standing before her mirror, she had exulted in her own beauty — not for its own sake, but for the sake of the one man whose heart awaited her touch as a silent musical instrument awaits the player's hand. She had imagined how John Fenton's gaze would take fire when he looked at her — and then had come Alfred Beverly's note, like a bolt from the blue, dispelling all her sweet imaginings. Even yet her thoughts were in confusion; the meaning of the scene around her seemed almost as inarticulate as the chatter of the crowd. That Alfred should be in Rothney for any purpose was sufficiently surprising,

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but that he should be here as the guest of John Fenton —“renewing acquaintance after many years”—properly belonged to the realm of things impossible. Oh, why, *why* did n't Fenton come?

Judge Wilton arrived in company with another gentleman and stood near the door talking to Mr. Nelson and Senator Christianson. The judge was a stout, black-haired, youthful-looking man who had early attained judicial honors without acquiring much judicial dignity; Alice knew him by sight, but to-night she hardly saw him, her glance passed so quickly to the gentleman at his elbow. The gentleman was looking toward her as if instinctively divining her place in the assemblage, and as her eyes met his he bowed with the captivating smile that she knew of old. A moment later Alfred was at her side, speaking her name. She introduced him to Mrs. Bowen and Mrs. Nelson, feeling like a mere spectator of her own action. He seated himself beside her in the chair next the aisle, and addressed his first remarks to all three ladies, saying the right thing, as usual, in his most engaging manner, and winning the susceptible fancy of Mrs. Nelson at the outset. And while he talked, fitting himself perfectly into the little niche that he was to occupy for the next two hours, the ushers went on stretching the seating capacity of the opera house to its ultimate corner-limits, and held hasty consultations over which they shook their heads. The members of the Rothney brass band, all now in their places at the left of the stage, hitched their chairs and desks into a closer circle to make room for a

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few distinguished late arrivals; the square hall outside the entrance was a heaving mass of heads and shoulders.

"I suppose this is what the newspapers call a 'representative audience'?" said Beverly to Alice, whom he had been watching for a moment in silence. ("Prettier than ever, God bless her! And I know she is glad to see me.")

"More than representative, I should say," Alice replied. "Judging by the number present, it seems doubtful if any one has stayed at home."

"Audiences fascinate me. Since I have been facing them so constantly I have learned to read them as I read books, and I have never seen two that were exactly alike. I am very happy, studying my library of human nature. Strange, is n't it, that you and I should both have been so slow to find our highest vocation — you as a novelist and I as a lecturer? We used to think ourselves nothing but humdrum magazine editors!"

"I am still a humdrum editor, Mr. Beverly. One novel is not conclusive proof of vocation."

"That depends on the novel, Miss Delamere. If you never wrote another line, 'Ardietta' would give you a secure and permanent place in the Hall of Fame. It is a wonderful story. Its equal has not been published for many a day."

"You are very good," said Alice. She was looking down; with the finger-tips of one white-gloved hand she slowly opened and shut the little pearl fan that lay in her lap.

"Yet I'll wager that you yourself cannot explain the

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peculiar charm of 'Ardietta,' " Beverly went on. "Tell me if you can."

"It is not always easy to account for the success of a novel."

"I did n't say 'success,' I said 'charm.' I felt it as soon as I began reading the story, but I did not fully understand it until the other day, when I learned that you were the author. That heroine of yours is Alice Delamere to the life. You drew your own portrait better than you knew."

Philander Armstrong, pausing on his way down the aisle, innocently defrauded Beverly of whatever reply Alice might have made to this speech. "Mr. Beverly, have you seen anything of Mayor Fenton since dinner?" Phil asked.

"I left him at his office, Mr. Armstrong," answered Beverly. "He was receiving a deputation of some kind; he told me not to wait for him, so I ran along with Judge Wilton."

Phil nodded and went his way. The musicians, having finished tuning their instruments, began playing a march, against which the confusion of tongues mounted higher than ever in clamorous antiphony.

"Concerning this same 'Ardietta,' " Beverly resumed, "I feel myself much ill-used and personally aggrieved. Here I have been for the past year, or such a matter, going to and fro in the world and singing the praises of 'Ardietta,' without knowing that it was your book. I think you might have given me a chance to offer my personal felicitations. I think you ought to have told

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me that you were the author. Surely I deserved that much, in memory of all the work we have done together in years past!"

"I told *no one*." Alice shut the pearl fan with a snap. She looked up, not at Beverly, but off into the verdant forest-glade upon the stage. In the pose of her proud little head and in the straightening of her soft red lips he read familiar danger-signals which he was wise enough to heed.

"I have made 'Ardietta' the principal illustration of my lecture on 'The American Novel,'" he said gently. "I have read extracts from it—usually portions of the sixth and ninth chapters and all of the eleventh—and they always move the audience to its very foundations. I have yet to find an audience that will not weep over that eleventh chapter. It's as much as I can do, myself, to read it with dry eyes!"

At the unconscious irony of these words, Alice found herself much nearer laughter than tears. How like Alfred it was, to appropriate the purest gold of her heart's treasure and shrewdly invest it for his own gain! How like him, to take that eleventh chapter of "Ardietta"—the chapter that she had written while her soul knelt in humble worship of a great Ideal—and barter it for the emotional tribute of some fashionable literary club!—"I am sure it loses nothing by the reading," she said courteously.

Beverly, who knew that his effective elocution was one of his strong points, smiled a gratified acknowledgement. "It is seldom that a reader has such inspiring

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lines," he replied, adding with more sincerity than often sounded in his tone, "I am greatly in your debt, Miss Delamere. Undoubtedly, the extracts from your delightful story have much to do with the popularity of my lecture on 'The American Novel.' It gives me pleasure to admit this; I am glad to have even so small a share in your success. With all my heart, I thank you."

"You are entirely welcome, Mr. Beverly," said Alice; and this time she did look up at him, with a musical little laugh that broke her own mental tension and sounded a significant note of change in her sentiments toward the man at her side. The tragic mask fell from her outworn disenchantment, revealing simple, harmless comedy; she saw that Beverly, bound by the necessary limitations of his shallow nature, had never fully deserved the condemnation heaped upon him by her own sterner judgment; she forgave him, freely and finally, for all the suffering he had cost her in the past.

He looked into the lovely little face that sparkled star-like beneath the cloudy white plumes of her wide-brimmed hat, and across his expression there came one of those rare flashes of passion that no woman but Alice Delamere had ever aroused in his selfish nature.

At this moment John Fenton passed up the aisle, and as he passed, unseen by either Alfred or Alice, he caught the faint chime of her mischievous laugh and saw the look on the face of the man at her side. Senator Nels Christianson walked beside the mayor; they took their places on the stage, preceded by the Presbyterian

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minister and the Reverend Mr. Dodd and followed by Judge Wilton and the chairman. The band ended its playing with a flourish; the hubbub in the room subsided like an outgoing tide. Mr. Nelson rapped with his gavel, while down in the audience his little wife palpitated with pride in the big, honest, diffident man whom she understood so much better than any one else did, and trembled with fear lest his unready tongue should trip.

"Ladties andt gentlemen!" he shouted valorously. "T' meeting will pleece come to ordter!"

"Oh, I guess he's all right!" murmured Mrs. Nelson, half aloud. She hitched and dropped her plump, flexible shoulders with a quick sigh of relief, and soon began to beam with delight on perceiving that 'Gust had sufficient presence of mind to wait until the room was reasonably quiet before beginning his introductory speech. He had rehearsed this speech to her that evening while he was dressing; as she listened now, her shining eyes glued to his face, her lips silently formed each word in advance of its utterance. He went along famously for about a minute and a quarter — and then left out a whole paragraph. It was, of course, the best paragraph of the speech, but fortunately its omission did not cause the total wreckage which often ensues upon the derailment of a set train of thought. He plunged forward to his conclusion. "But I must not say too mutch about the anniversary meetingss that we haf heldt in the past, or I will be getting into Jutch Wilton's fieldt." (The original point of this remark

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suffered from the fact that most of what Mr. Nelson had had to say about past anniversary meetings had been incorporated in the paragraph that was left out.)

"It iss enough, my friendts, that I shall bid you, one andt all, rersidents of Rot'ney and friendts from out of t' citty, a most hearty welcome. T' program will be opened wit' prayer by t' Refferend Robert Mathewss."

The chairman, pink to the tips of his ears but otherwise unscathed, turned with a jerky little bow toward the Presbyterian minister, who stiffly unbent the angles of his sitting posture and walked to the front of the stage. Mr. Mathews was an old man, so frail in physique that he had looked all his life as if a puff of wind might waft him hence, yet now, at three-score-and-ten, seemed no more likely to die than before. He spoke very deliberately, in a high, weak voice, invoking a blessing in turn upon the occasion, the speakers, the city, the commonwealth, the United States of America, President Roosevelt, and the human race as a whole. It was a well-rounded petition, rhetorically unexceptionable, but it took time. Philander Armstrong had foreseen this, and had provided for it in arranging the program. "Reverend Mathews is sure to be long-winded, so we'll put him first," he had said to Fenton. "Parson Dodd can be trusted to run the benediction through on time." The invocation ended and the audience recomposed for the business of the evening, the first speaker, Judge Wilton, was announced. The Judge stepped forward and laid upon the speaker's desk the three-inch slip of paper which constituted the

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limit of his notes on informal discourse; he also took his watch from his pocket somewhat pointedly, and laid it beside the slip of paper. His movements were accompanied by thunderous applause, which he recognized by two or three careless little nods, his keen, bright eye roving over the packed auditorium.

"My friends," he began, "twelve years ago to-day the town site of Rothney was staked out by a surveying party consisting of two Englishmen from Toronto, a fellow from northern Wisconsin," he tapped himself on the shirt-front, "a half-breed Injun, and a yellow dog."

This exordium struck the keynote for his whole speech, which was Wiltonian throughout, colloquial, inelegant, at times even ungrammatical, yet always straight to the point. He told the story of Rothney as no other man could have told it, setting off its humor against its pathos, neglecting none of its dramatic possibilities, and withal keeping close to the facts. People outside, who had been unable to crush their way into the opera house, knew by the frequent bursts of laughter from those within, that the judge was still on the platform. The speech concluded in the nick of time. Gathering up his watch and slip of paper—he had glanced several times at the former, but not once at the latter—the judge again nodded genially to the audience and took his seat. The band struck up a medley of operatic airs; the buzz of conversation was resumed.

"Very good, was n't it?" said Beverly, graciously. "No doubt that man is a fair specimen of the western

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district judge. Each of the men on the platform represents a distinct type — don't you think so? Take that old silver-haired dominie from the kirk — thoroughly picturesque! But tell me," he adjusted his eyeglasses and swept a glance over the six black-coated gentlemen who occupied the forest-glade, "*am* I prejudiced by friendship, or is my old friend, John Fenton, really the best-looking man of them all?"

It was his first direct reference to Fenton. He gained no information from his quick look at Alice, who possessed the average feminine ability to conceal her feelings and was at this moment especially on her guard.

"I think Mr. Christianson is handsome," she said serenely.

"So he is — a regular Viking! Oh, these prairies produce some splendid men and women. No question about that. I have been noticing the extraordinary number of pretty girls in this audience. They seem to have a sense of artistic adornment, too; they even know how to dress their hair! Some of the heads in this room would delight a sculptor by their perfect outline."

His eyes rested on Alice's hair as he spoke — her plumed hat now lay in her lap — and on the instant his expression changed.

"How do you suppose I felt," he said suddenly, "when I got into New York one day last March and learned that you were dangerously ill?" He had dropped his voice to a vibrant undertone meant for

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her alone, a tone that isolated them completely from their noisy surroundings.

"Why — you were sorry, I trust. I'll give you credit for that much humanity."

"I haunted the hospital like a ghost. No, I never sent up my card. They told me you were unconscious all the time. I came and went away again — came and went away again — like a lost spirit. It was hell."

(Bravo, Alfred Beverly! What woman who had ever loved you could fail to thrill at such strong words so tenderly uttered?)

Alice listened, conscious that Alfred spoke effectively and that she was not in the least affected by what he said. "I was very ill for a time," she said simply, "but it is all past, now. Do you recognize the air that the band is playing?"

The opera medley being finished, Senator Christianson took the floor. With an impressive presence, a cultivated enunciation, unlimited command of subject-matter, and a style that was colossal, the senator seemed formed for the broadest fields of public oratory. He always presented his subject in the large; the future of Rothney became in his hands a replica of the nation's future, and by the time he had reached his truly eloquent peroration he was preaching a doctrine of national salvation. Necessarily, he was a serious speaker, never indulging in wit for wit's sake; yet at the close of his address he was tendered an ovation that almost threatened the shabby old opera house with collapse.

"Good! Fine!" declared Alfred Beverly, heartily

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lending both hands to the general testimony of appreciation. "*That* is a very able man. He will be heard from in Washington one of these days."

"They say he would have been in Washington long ago if it had not been for cabals in his own State," said Alice. Her cheeks were flushed with excitement. She doubted if it would be possible for John Fenton to surpass the senator's splendid effort; was there danger that he might not equal it? She lifted her eyes anxiously to where he sat upon the stage; he was not looking in her direction; indeed, so far as she had observed, he had not once looked at her, nor in any way manifested consciousness that she was in the opera house.

The band boys launched forth upon their third selection, a new and popular waltz which commanded a modicum of quiet listening from those close by. The rise and fall of importunate rhythm fitted the pulse of Alice's thought like the setting of a song; before her mind appeared a picture of the porch at Riverside and a lighted doorway beyond which the figures of John Fenton and Madeline Allingham circled in time to this same new waltz. Through the vision, as through a veil, she read and reread one line of print on her program, "Present Needs of our City. By Honorable John Fenton, Mayor of Rothney." Once more she raised her eyes, this time to find Fenton's full upon her, and then she knew that he had been thinking of her all the evening. But thinking—*what*? If she had deceived him in any way, betrayed his confidence, or wilfully wronged him, then there might be some excuse

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for the stern, cold sadness of his present regard. But she had done nothing,—nothing to justify such a change in him. Hurt and offended, Alice proudly lowered her eyes to her program. A mist came over the printed page; the letters loomed large and spectral, “Honorable John Fenton, Mayor of Rothney.”

The waltz ended in a tumultuous crescendo, and after it had been all-but encored, the room became noticeably quiet. Phil Armstrong, standing back in a corner against the wall, clenched both hands until the nails bit the palm. “If Fenton does n’t make good *now*,” he thought, “the game is up!” Down toward the front of the dense throng, Alfred Beverly murmured meditatively, as if more to himself than to Alice, “Wonder how Jack *will* measure up against that last speaker? He used to be a fair debater in his college days, but he never was much of an orator.”

The chairman’s voice became audible. “Pressent Needs of our Citty. By *Honorable John Fenton, Mayor of Rot’ney*.” The italics were Mr. Nelson’s, an involuntary tribute to a man he ardently admired, and they were to the waiting audience like the electric spark that fires the mine. When Alice at last looked up from her program, Fenton was bowing a third acknowledgement of the demonstration that throbbed and surged from every part of the room. He then stood waiting, the shapely outline of his lifted head and square shoulders defined against the verdant leafage of the stage-drop, while his glance, quiet, direct, and friendly, scanned the “library of human nature” spread out

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before him. Each of the eleven hundred persons who occupied seats and the two or three hundred who lined walls and perched on window-ledges believed that Mayor Fenton looked straight at him. The personality of the man upon the platform gripped every one like a magnet.

"Three aspects of Rothney are placed before your consideration this evening — past, future, and present." Fenton's voice did not rise above conversational pitch, in these opening words, but it reached every attent ear in the room. "The order of arrangement is unusual, but logical, since it is only in the knowledge of what has been done, and in the hope of what may be done, that we can best do what we have to do, here and now. It is my privilege to follow Judge Wilton's interesting historical sketch and Senator Christianson's inspiring prophecy by a brief statement of what seem to be our most important proximate problems and opportunities."

Thus did Fenton polarize the human intelligences that he had first magnetized by his silent look, and from that moment on, he held his audience not as a unit, but as an aggregation of independent, thinking individuals. He was no spellbinder, and there would be no reaction from his influence after he had ceased to exercise it. "I think I have the concurrence of every one present — particularly of the gentlemen who are standing — when I express the opinion that one of the most urgent of our present needs is a new opera house." These sentences, immediately following the introduction, struck a popular note and evoked a round of applause.

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Fenton kept to the popular note for some time, presenting various opportunities for civic improvement in a way that made them appear not only attractive but feasible, and pointing out the many good features that might be added to civic policy before he touched upon the evils that must be subtracted therefrom. He made his first departure from the paths of peace in an earnest demand for radical reorganization of the waterworks system — he had been talking artesian wells for many years, and the theme had come to be regarded as his pet hobby — but even here he left his hearers in high good humor by informing them officially that the Joseph Hirschmann Company of Minneapolis was ready at any time to buy Rothney's waterworks bonds at two per cent premium, an announcement which created wilder enthusiasm than had been roused by Nels Christianson's finest oratorical periods.

He evaded none of the unfinished business by which Edward Kenney had sought to embarrass his administration. The suit of the Zenith Electric Company to secure rebate on its franchise-tax — a bold attempt to swindle the city — was handled as coolly and gracefully as if it had been respectable routine business. The crowning "shame" of Rothney, the street paving — a very pretty little municipal scandal, modelled in miniature upon the gigantic grafts of our proudest corporations — was approached with equal candor. The most approved methods had been employed by Mayor Kenney and the sharers of his prospective profit, whereby to furnish Rothney with the cheapest kind of pavement at

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the highest possible price, but at the time of Kenney's resignation few taxpayers knew how matters really stood except that, thanks to John Fenton's sturdy opposition to the mayor, the streets were still unpaved. Yet the people who looked for a sensation when Fenton began to talk about the paving-contracts were disappointed; and that red-faced man near the door, who whispered wheezily to his neighbor, "Here's where J. F. gives Ed Kenney the upper-cut," was equally out of his reckoning. With perfect clarity of statement, and without a hint of personal invective, Fenton marshalled the plain facts and let them speak for themselves. The simplicity of the case, when freed from the confusion of issues by which the Kenney faction had sought to guard it, astounded men whose honest judgment had been hitherto led astray. The Kenney partisans began to exchange troubled and significant glances, long before John Fenton was through talking about the paving-contracts. Still there was no sensation.

Then came a brief summing-up of the county-seat contest, the main points of which were already known. Several months before, a petition had been circulated praying that the seat of Penfield County be removed from Rainsford to Rothney; investigation of this petition had shown that many of its signers were non-naturalized aliens, minors, and otherwise disqualified persons, and also developed the fact that certain influential electors of the county had been approached with a promise that Rothney would build a sixty-thousand-dollar courthouse and a fifteen-thousand-dollar

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jail if the county-seat was safely delivered into its hands. The men behind this movement had shunned publicity, and their identity had been merely suspected until to-night, when Fenton read an affidavit signed by several prominent electors, which laid the fraudulent petition and bribery at the door of Edward Kenney and two of his close adherents. Here, at last, was a sensation indeed! The audience held its breath in silence. Fenton returned the affidavit to his pocket without comment.

"It is my intention," he said, "to call a special election at an early day to vote upon the three matters which cannot be put over until the next general election — namely, the Zenith Electric franchise, the waterworks bond, and the county-seat contest. I trust that every voter will take pains to inform himself in regard to these issues, so that he may vote intelligently. The neglect of the ballot in Rothney has been the chief cause of our long minority rule. Without the passive consent of the 'better element' that stays away from the polls, the minority could not have flaunted their abuse of the druggists' permit, nor smuggled roulette-wheels into the back doors of pool-rooms, nor protected, as if it were our most valuable territory, that dubious region 'north of the track,' which within the past two years has become a stronghold of vice. Men, you know this! Are you willing to stand up and be counted as protectors of vice? I tell you, face to face, that each one of you is individually responsible for existing conditions. Let every decent man in this room go to the

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polls next election-day and cast his vote on the side of law and order, and that day conditions will begin to improve. Don't stay at home and then complain of the men whom 'They' elected in your absence. Remember, a candidate is not often much better than his constituency, and never much worse. I can speak with absolute personal freedom on this point, standing before you as I do, an emergency-mayor whom you did n't elect." A laugh rippled over the room, ending in a torrent of applause, while Fenton stood looking down upon the wide spread of upturned faces and the flicker of clapping hands, his eyes twinkling with a good-humored smile. "Yes, an emergency-mayor, and very glad to serve you as such. But there is one kind of mayor that I'm not, and that is a 'reform mayor'! I am not a purist, and I do not look for any miraculous conversion of your political and civic morals. Some of you may never be converted — I can't say how that will be. If you want a clean town and clean city government, you *can have them* — that's all. For my own part, I promise that so long as I hold office every vital question shall be put up directly to the people and settled by popular vote. The work that we have to do cannot be done without co-operation; therefore, I recommend the immediate organization of a commercial club that shall also be a law-enforcement league. If we all pitch in and do our share, I think we shall have little leisure for unconstructive criticism of others. We shall be so busy with what We are doing that we won't have time to worry about what They have left undone. My

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friends, We, not They, are the ones to solve our city's problems, remedy its evils, and develop its resources. I thank you."

No one was prepared for this abrupt conclusion; Fenton had not, like Senator Christianson, led his hearers upward, step by step, along a grand staircase of well-built peroration; he had rushed them forward on a level, and dropped them over a sheer edge without a moment's warning. The applause seemed to gain momentum from the very suddenness of its start. Again and again Fenton rose and bowed, yet the roar and thunder of acclamation kept on.

"What's the matter with Mayor Fenton?" shouted a sonorous bass voice from the back of the room; the response was deafening, "*He's* all right!"

"Three cheers for Mayor Fenton!"

"Three cheers for Judge Wilton!"

"Three cheers for Senator Christianson!"

The round was given, three times three. Some one started the shout of "We, not They!" which was taken up by a score of lusty youths not many years loose from the State university, who chanted it like a college yell.

"What's the matter with Philander Armstrong?" sang the *basso profundo* as before; and again the roof rang with the chorus.

Mr. Nelson, nonplussed by this unlooked-for shattering of parliamentary rules, turned to the senator for advice.

"Let them have their fling," said Christianson, his

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own handsome face wearing a broad smile of sympathy with the spirit that had taken possession of the floor.

Fenton, who did not altogether enjoy having honor thrust upon him so riotously, sent a sharp, accusatory glance toward that part of the room in which he had last seen Philander Armstrong, but the editor had disappeared. Phil was, in fact, engaged in quelling the amiable riot; he had not incited it, but he had allowed it to go on as long as he thought it served its purpose. The room was soon fairly quiet. Mr. Nelson arose and gave the table an emphatic thump with his gavel.

"Ladties and gentlemen! It hass always been our custom, at t' cloce of our programss, to t'row t' meeting open t' informal discussion. Thiss seemss hardtly necessary to-night—" The audience howled with glee, Mrs. Nelson giggled ecstatically; dear old 'Gust had actually ventured a joke while on the platform!—"but if there iss any other business before t' meeting, it may now be put in t' form of a motion, andt attressed to t' chair."

The tall, stooping form of Andrew Hays lifted itself slowly from the middle of the audience. Mr. Hays was the proprietor of the Farmers' Mill, the wealthiest and most parsimonious of Rothney's citizens, the chief obstructionist of the city council—an honest man, nevertheless, whose word was as good as his bond and quite as difficult to obtain. "Mr. Chairman!" he bawled in his usual brow-beating tone.

"Mester Hayss."

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"I would like," said the miller, hunching his angular shoulders in his loose-fitting, unbuttoned frock coat and slipping his long hands into his trousers' pockets, "I would just like to take up Mayor Fenton's suggestion, which he made just now, and embody it in the form of a motion. I move you, Mr. Chairman, that his honor, the Mayor, be requested to call a mass-meeting for as early a date as possible, to organize a commercial club and to discuss all the matters that have been laid before us this evening."

The motion received a dozen seconds, and carried unanimously. Phil Armstrong scarcely believed his ears. "Hays! We've landed Hays!" he muttered to Dick Harvey, who had by this time worked his way back from the proscenium. "Did you get the whole speech?" he added, his eye following the stenographer's book that Dick was stuffing into his pocket.

"Sure," said Dick, jauntily tossing back his hair. "He led me a chase, but I hung on."

"Any further business?" inquired the chairman. "If not, t' meeting standts atchurned. I hope you will all remain to entchoy the good things that the ladties of the refreshment committee haf provitet for us. T' audience will pleece rice, andt remain standting while t' benediction iss pronounced by t' Refferend Ralston Dodd."

The seated portion of the audience surged upward noisily; the standing portion, that had been shifting its weight from foot to foot all evening, straightened in attentive erectness. Mr. Dodd came forward with

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two long, noiseless strides, stretching both hands toward the people; his mellow voice fell soothingly upon the surcharged silence. The band boys, preinstructed by Philander Armstrong, had their instruments in position and their eyes on Mr. Dodd; five seconds after the Amen had died away, the stentorian unison of all the brasses on an up-beat of the director's baton — the unmistakable first two notes of the "Star Spangled Banner" — sounded its thrilling signal to the American soul of the restless crowd, making it One. Instantly many men and women were singing with the band; the tune was played through but once — "Nobody knows more than the first verse, you know," ran Phil's instructions — and then the musicians swung off into the more secular rhythm of Sousa's "Stars and Stripes," the lively measure of which was soon lost in a whirl of talk and laughter and the scoring of hundreds of loose chairs over the rough board floor.

An informal reception followed, in which the three speakers of the evening were descended upon by a horde of clamorous admirers. Senator Christianson, whose temperamental coolness usually protected him against such onslaught, found himself sorely beset by his friends, while for nearly half an hour Mayor Fenton remained hidden, all but the top of his head, by the enthusiasts who crowded forward to speak with him. It was some time before Alice Delamere and Alfred Beverly made their way to Fenton, who quickly detached his busy right hand and held it out to Alice as she swayed close in the crush. With a heart full of gladness and sadness

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that no words could have suitably expressed, she uttered an inane commonplace. "Congratulations, Mr. Fenton. You covered yourself with glory this evening."

"Thank you, Miss Delamere. I am glad that you found the meeting interesting."

"Old man, it was *great!*" Beverly grasped him by the hand and elbow and gave him a cordial shake. "I'm proud of you, Jack, proud of you."

The lank brown hand of Andrew Hays reached across Beverly's arm, asserting its consecutive claim, and the tide swept on, carrying off Alice and her squire and bringing Madeline Allingham on the next wave.

"Oh, it was fine — *dandy!*" whispered Madeline, smiling up at the hero of the hour with the manner of a petted child. "See how I split my glove, clapping! But *I* don't care — I'd do it again!"

Fenton had only time to thank her, with a laugh and a quick, warm pressure of the little hand in the split glove, before she, too, was swept by.

Madeline came upon Phil Armstrong a moment later. He had just sent two chairs skidding toward the boys who were stacking them in one corner; he whirled and came up short on his heels, facing Madeline.

"Mr. Armstrong, this is all your work," she said concisely.

"What is?" His gray eyes were dancing, his breath came quickly; he looked like the winner at the goal of a running-race.

"You know what I mean. You were the prime mover

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in this affair. Uncle Dave says so — everybody says so. Oh, I think it's simply magnificent to plan such things and bring them to pass!" The girl spoke in all sincerity, recognizing Phil's genius by the light of her own similar gift for bringing things to pass. Her words dropped like golden honey into the elixir of his triumph.

He quaffed the elixir airily. "Perhaps I did n't do quite everything myself," he said with the grand self-sufficiency that can afford to share its wealth. "There were others."

"You were the chief," she insisted. "So — Hail to the Chief!" She held out her hand with a gesture in which imperiousness, graciousness, and sweet timidity were curiously combined.

"I'm not fit to shake hands," laughed Phil, spreading wide his palms in confirmation of the statement. "These chairs were dusted by contract, and there's been a graft worked somewhere."

She turned in displeasure, and left him. He looked after her speculatively but without much concern. Certainly the elixir had gone to his head. Before the evening was over he had so far recovered from his obsession that he sought Madeline out and humbly made his peace with her.

CHAPTER XXIV

AS SEEN FROM THE HOTEL KENNEY

THERE were two persons who came late to the anniversary meeting, occupied standing-room near the door, and left while the "Star Spangled Banner" was being sung. One was an undersized, sal-low man with furtive eyes behind large, round spectacles, and a prim, one-sided mouth fringed with a few straight lines of thin, black mustache; he was an old-line politician somewhat noted for agility in reversing tactics and in getting out of harm's way, the type of political acrobat that has been described as "always sitting on the fence with one ear to the ground." He was, in short, "Tommy" Stone of the *Rothney Tribune*, editorial figure-head of a journalistic craft whose course was at present being charted by Colonel Nicholas Hartshorne. The other gentleman, benignly bald, full-paunched, triple-chinned, was "Billy" Hunter, clerk of the Hotel Kenney. On reaching the sidewalk Editor Stone disappeared after the sudden and complete manner of his kind, while Mr. Hunter waddled with slow dignity across the street to the hotel.

Mr. Hunter dismissed the boy whom he had left in charge of the office, and taking up the *Minneapolis Journal* that had arrived on Number Nine, he seated

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himself in one of the leather chairs facing the window. His eye wandered frequently from the printed page to the building over the way. The band still played at intervals; now and then a party left the opera house, calling good nights. At the end of half an hour Mr. Hunter threw aside his paper and strolled to the door. A dozen young men had come forth from the meeting in a body and were now marching down the street in fours, chanting their new Rothney yell:

“We, we, we, not They!
We, we, we, not They!
Who are we?
We are the
P-e-o, p-l-e!
Rothney, Rothney!”

An automobile swept up from the west and paused at the hotel entrance. Two men alighted from the machine, one with slow precision, the other with bounding haste; both paused to look at the procession tramping down the opposite sidewalk. Edward Kenney laughed sneeringly, but Loudon Allingham was silent.

“Is that Fenton’s gang? — that howling mob?” inquired Kenney of Hunter.

Billy nodded, settling his manifold chin over his collar. He looked solemn, as well he might after witnessing the rout of the Kenney forces. He had no personal objection to John Fenton; on the contrary, he liked him so far as loyalty to his overlord permitted such sentiment. Billy was one of the few men whom Edward Kenney had attached to himself by bonds of genuine

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affection. Years ago Ed had done Billy a good turn, and the latter had never forgotten it.

Mr. Allingham flattened his evening hat and tucked it under his arm. His wrinkled face showed a slight russet flush. "Was there a large attendance at the meeting?" he asked.

"Tremenjus," replied Hunter sadly. "The place was packed clear out to the stairs, and several hundred were turned away."

Kenney wheeled with one of his favorite oaths and strode off across the office, disappearing through a door at the rear. Mr. Allingham and the corpulent clerk remained at the entrance, looking out.

"Did you hear the speeches?" asked Mr. Allingham.

"Yes. Christianson's was the best, but Fenton's took best with the audience. Fenton has put Rothney right in his vest-pocket, Mr. Allingham. The crowd went wild over him."

"Were any Rainsford men present?"

"Quite a few. I think some of them came intending to raise rough-house, but they went away without making any disturbance."

Mr. Allingham stood silent for a time, very erect in his black Cavendish coat. He mentally compared Billy's picture of the Rothney demonstration with the scene at the county-seat from which he had just been transported by that twenty-minute spin in Kenney's automobile. The Rainsford affair had been a lamentable fizzle; Kenney, the first and most advertised speaker

As Seen from the Hotel Kenney

of the evening, had addressed his small, lukewarm audience in a tone of bombastic insolence, while Mr. Allingham sat by, outwardly calm, inwardly raging. By the time the "Holy Harmonizer" gained the rostrum he had the exceptional experience of knowing that his graceful and conciliatory address was wholly thrown away; worse still, that it was received in silent ridicule. On the way from Rainsford to Rothney he told Edward Kenney exactly what he thought of him, an extreme policy to which Loudon Allingham rarely resorted in dealing with any one; while Kenney, for the first time in his long pupilage, rebelled against his master's correction and answered him with bitter recriminations. But for certain incomplete transactions in which they were equally involved, Mr. Allingham would have discarded his unruly confederate then and there.

Kenney re-entered the hotel office. "Suppose we go over and see the wind-up of this Fenton & Armstrong circus," he suggested. "I understand they are still doing stunts in the sociability line."

"I think, my dear Edward, that it would be wiser for you not to appear," said Mr. Allingham quietly.

The pupil shot an inquiring glance at the master. There had been no "dear Edward" flavor in the last remarks he had heard from that source. "Why so?" he demanded. "Am I not a citizen of Rothney? And does n't this affair purport to be a citizen's meeting? I fail to see how they could exclude me if I chose to appear."

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"Oh, well, suit yourself," said Mr. Allingham, shrugging. "Were I in your place, I should consider such action an undue sacrifice of personal dignity."

Billy Hunter dared not verbally endorse the great man's opinion, but he looked his devout belief therein. After a moment's reflection Kenney admitted curtly, "I guess that 's so," and once more the master's will prevailed. "Let 's go up on the balcony and smoke, Mr. Allingham. Billy, trot out the best you 've got in stock."

The fat clerk sprang with surprising nimbleness to execute the order of his chief. The hotel proprietor and the millionaire, with cigars alight, passed up a wide flight of rubber-carpeted stairs and out upon the balcony that overhung the sidewalk. The parlor and the balcony were deserted — everybody, both transients and regular boarders, had gone to the anniversary meeting. At the corner of the balcony, behind the tubbed bay-trees, Kenney and his guest smoked for some time without exchanging a word. A steady stream of people now poured from the opera house; family carryalls were being brought across from the sheds on Market Place and driven away, loaded to capacity. When August Nelson's victoria drew up in turn, three ladies appeared at the opera house entrance, attended by John Fenton and Alfred Beverly; Fenton handed Mrs. Bowen and Mrs. Nelson into the victoria, while Beverly performed a like service for Alice Delamere. Kenney took his cigar from his mouth and bent forward with a scowl.

"Who 's *that* fellow?" he muttered. "I never saw him before."

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Mr. Allingham unresponsively retained his favorite attitude, with his left elbow on the arm of his chair, his cigar temporarily taking the place of the pince-nez in his lifted hand; but a moment later he sat stiffly upright. Dave Stanley drove his dancing thoroughbreds across from Market Place; Fenton and Beverly, who had been about to re-enter the building, stepped back and accompanied Mrs. Stanley and Miss Peck to the carriage, all of which unimportant detail passed from Mr. Allingham's consciousness in a flash, leaving him blind to everything but the vision of his daughter Madeline, who slowly emerged from the entrance, escorted by Philander Armstrong. The light was full on the girl's beautiful face as she smiled up at the insurgent editor; and Phil's expression, as he replied to some parting word of hers after the carriage had begun to move away, received a revelatory illumination from the arc-lamp above. Mr. Allingham sat like a stone image behind the clipped bay-trees.

Kenney settled back with an angry fling. "I've tried a dozen times to get an introduction to that girl," he growled, "and he's blocked me every time, damn him!"

Mr. Allingham turned furiously upon the speaker. "What do you mean, sir?" he thundered. "How dare you refer to my daughter in such terms?"

Kenney's jaw dropped. "Eh? — what? — Your daughter?" he repeated. "I don't understand. I was talking about Miss Delamere."

"Oh!" Mr. Allingham fell into his former attitude;

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but the withered red still glowed in his cheek, and his watery eye gleamed implacably.

"I've met your daughter," added Kenney, resentfully. "You introduced me yourself."

"Certainly. Of course!" snapped Mr. Allingham. "I beg your pardon, Edward. I was preoccupied."

The band played a jingle of popular airs, winding up with "Home, sweet home," and soon after the musicians came tumbling down the stairs with their instrument-cases under their arms, laughing, jostling, lighting cigarettes, and casting parting gibes at each other as they scattered toward their several abodes. John Fenton and Alfred Beverly were whirled up Bellevue Avenue in Senator Christianson's automobile. Judge Wilton took Philander Armstrong home in his little sky-blue runabout. The janitor switched off the lights, and in a few moments the large, barn-like building was in darkness. The echo of the last footstep died away; Main Street lay empty, under the big, white eye of the arc-lamp that swung across the square.

Kenney arose, throwing the remnant of his cigar over the balcony rail. "Well, Mr. Allingham," he said, with a grating laugh, "the play is played out — and a superb grand stand play it has been, without doubt. Now do you believe what I have told you about the combined strength of these two men? Nothing but the most radical measures will break the combination."

"I still think that we must not be too radical in dealing with John Fenton," said Mr. Allingham, who had regained some degree of his customary suavity. "For

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the present it will be sufficient to keep him headed off. John is not a particularly aggressive fighter; he is better at holding a fort than at taking one."

"Not aggressive?" Kenney laughed again, even more disagreeably than before. "I notice he always gets what he wants."

"He depends upon the assistance of this impudent upstart, Philander Armstrong," said Mr. Allingham, enunciating the words delicately, through thin, half-closed lips. "Where Armstrong is concerned, the more drastic our measures, the better."

"You can't strike at him without hitting Fenton," objected Kenney.

"We shall see," said Mr. Allingham.

CHAPTER XXV

" I SHALL ALWAYS BE YOUR FRIEND "

MR. ALLINGHAM drove out to Riverside next morning in Mr. Kenney's automobile, returning in time to take an eleven o'clock train south. Before leaving Rothney he posted a letter which Phil Armstrong found in his lockbox at noon.

Mrs. Stanley and Madeline received Mr. Allingham when he called. Dave was superintending harvest in distant fields, and Miss Peck was busy with household tasks. After Mr. Allingham's departure Mrs. Stanley shut herself up in her room — took to her bed, in fact. Madeline spent the remainder of the morning in the library, looking over Dave's newspaper files.

Mrs. Stanley did not come down to luncheon. " She has a headache," said Miss Peck. " You 'd better not disturb her, Dave," she added, as her brother-in-law started for the stairway. " She is probably asleep by this time."

Dave ruefully withdrew his foot from the lowest stair. " I guess that jamboree at the opera house was too much for her," he said.

Miss Peck pursed her lips without replying. She had not been admitted to her sister's confidence, but she shrewdly suspected that Maisie's distress was more mental than physical.

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Madeline came up behind Dave as he smoked his cigar on the porch after luncheon. "Do something for me, Uncle Dave?" she coaxed, slipping her arm around his neck. "Take me into town! I've errands to do, and it's stupid to go alone."

"Sure!" he replied. "When d' you want to start?"

"Whenever you have finished your cigar. I'll run upstairs and change my dress."

He looked after her, wondering why she found it necessary to change from the pretty pink gingham frock that she wore. He was still more mystified when she reappeared in an exquisite sea-green silk gown, one of the most becoming in her summer's wardrobe. "Humph!" he observed, eyeing her with mingled criticism and admiration, while pulling on his dingy dog-skin gloves. "What you dressed up so for? You're much too fine a lady to go drivin' with a fellow in a flannel shirt."

"I am *not* dressed up," she rejoined with stately emphasis.

Dave made a wry face, nursing his cheek as if it smarted from the impact of the girl's retort, and meekly untied the horse. Madeline soon recovered her good temper, and chattered pleasantly on the way to town. The day was a sulky one, neither fair nor foul; along the horizon lay banks of leaden cloud, as changeless in shape and color as if painted on canvas; the irregular foliage of the box elders hung motionless on the stem, its summer verdure lost with no compensating gain of

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autumn brightness; the dust in the road seemed too inert to rise as Dave's runabout sped lightly over it.

"I've a little business I may as well attend to," said Dave. "Where d' you want to go first?"

"Please drop me at Smith's," Madeline answered, "and call for me in — well, in about three-quarters of an hour; I'll wait for you at the soda fountain."

"All right," said Dave.

He dropped her accordingly at the main entrance of the department store. Madeline passed quickly through the store, pausing nowhere, and issued from the Fourth Street door; she glanced up and down the block, breathing more freely when she perceived Uncle Dave's runabout travelling rapidly in the direction of the bank on the Sixth Street corner. Two impulses were at war within her bosom, the fierce honesty of the Pecks and the ingenious duplicity of the Allinghams. It was not the first time that she had been torn between these two principles of action, but never before had the choice fallen upon so grave an alternative.

She proceeded down Main Street, across Third, her step becoming slower and less confident on entering the block between Third and Second, which was a region she rarely had occasion to visit. The building in front of which she finally halted had a tailor's shop on the ground floor with a side entrance leading to the upper story. Over this side entrance swung two signs, *Rothney Advance*, and *Advance Job Print*. Madeline gave one look up the narrow stairway and then took the flight at a run. A dim light shone at the top

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of the stairs, thrown back from the open door of the editorial room in front. Madeline approached the door with a beating heart, only to find the room unoccupied. Armstrong's roll-top desk stood open, littered with papers; through the door of the composing-room beyond came the hum of an electric motor, and a sound like the clack of a typewriter, only louder. Madeline hesitated. If Armstrong was out, then all her subterfuge had been useless; if in the building, he was probably in the composing-room. Must she go in search of him? She felt that if she did not go forward promptly she would find herself beating an ignominious retreat from this cluttered, tenantless editorial room, the very walls of which seemed to challenge her with the inquiry, “What business can *you* possibly have here?” She advanced to the door of the composing-room.

Armstrong sat at his Mergenthaler, setting up Dick Harvey's report of John Fenton's speech. He was alone; the printer had been obliged to leave at noon on account of illness, and the office-boy had just gone up-town on an errand. Phil sprang like a dart at sight of the apparition framed by the doorway. He stood staring for a moment before he recovered sufficient presence of mind to turn the current off the Mergenthaler. “Miss Allingham!” he exclaimed in a low voice.

He came slowly to meet her. He seemed a very different Phil from the blithe youth who had worn the new Tuxedo so gallantly the evening before; he was coatless and collarless, his blue cambric shirt-sleeves

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rolled up above his lean, square elbows. His angular face had a haggard look; his expression seemed but the dull gray ash of last night's fire.

"I—I fear I am interrupting you," said Madeline breathlessly.

"Not at all. Come into the office."

She turned and preceded him to the editorial sanctum. Beside his desk they again stood and looked at each other, as much at a loss as two children who have been suddenly thrown upon each other's resources. Madeline was the first to recover self-possession.

"Mr. Armstrong, Aunt Maisie lost a cameo brooch at the meeting last night," she said, speaking rapidly and in an extremely business-like tone. "It is a keepsake, and auntie was sorry to lose it. We thought that it might be well to put an ad in the paper, so that if any one found the brooch it might be returned."

"Yes, that would be a good idea," said Armstrong. He swept the desk free of its clutter, drew forward a tablet and pencil, and waved his hand toward the empty editorial chair.

"Oh—shall I write it?" said Madeline. "I don't believe I ever wrote an advertisement." She slipped into the chair, drawing off her right glove, and concocted a statement of Aunt Maisie's loss which, after Phil had stricken out a few superfluous words, ran as follows: "Lost, Monday evening at grand opera house, a lady's cameo brooch. Finder will please return to *Advance* office and receive reward."

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"I think that will do," said Phil. "Twenty-five cents for one insertion."

She gazed at him in innocent surprise. He was still quite grave, though a slight sparkle had awakened in his indomitable gray eyes. "Oh!" said Madeline with a gasp. "How stupid of me! I forgot that you have to pay for advertisements." She opened her purse and turned over the crisp bank-notes and the two or three gold coins that it contained; she recognized the absurdity of asking Phil to change a ten-dollar bill or even a five-dollar gold-piece, and her cheeks were a lovely rose-pink by the time she had found a half-dollar at the bottom of the purse. Phil calmly drew a handful of loose change from his pocket and gave Madeline a nickel and two dimes.

"Thank you, Miss Allingham," he said, scrawling a hieroglyphic "Pd" across the copy. "Please tell Mrs. Stanley that I will give the ad a prominent heading in Friday's paper. I hope it may bring back the lost keepsake — it is always a pity to lose such things. I'll have the janitor make a thorough search of the opera house, too. The brooch might have dropped in some odd corner where it would not be seen."

"I had n't thought of that," said Madeline. Judging by her absent manner, she was not thinking of it now. She still sat at the desk, drawing on her glove. Phil noticed how slowly the green silk sheath crept over the soft white hand and arm; he saw that Madeline was trying to gain time — possibly trying to muster courage

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for the real purpose of her visit. He knew that she ought not to be here in his office, yet his young blood leaped with lawless joy in the fact that she had come.

"Would you like to see your ad in linotype?" he asked. "It would take only a minute to set it up."

"Yes, indeed, if I may."

They went back to the composing-room. Phil displayed his Mergenthaler, explaining its intricacies so far as they were orally explicable. Then he took Madeline into the printing-room and showed her his new Goss, of which he was evidently rather proud; he even showed her his stock of print-paper, lingering over each item in the material equipment of his journalistic enterprise, with a feeling difficult to describe, while Madeline, close at his elbow, listened with wide-eyed interest. They returned from the press-room, walking very slowly, drawing out the moments like a golden thread.

"Now for your ad," said Phil, pausing beside the Mergenthaler. "You may set it up yourself if you like. I suppose you have written on a typewriter at some time — most people have."

"I have played with one sometimes, in papa's office. I know nothing about it, though. I use only one finger, I believe."

At the indirect reference to her father, a shadow fell across the two young faces bent over the linotype machine. Phil did not look up; he was removing the unfinished column of Fenton's speech and making things ready for Madeline to "play" with the wizard mechanism.

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"You 're sure I won't break anything?"

"You can't possibly."

She sat down before the machine, and tapping lightly and rapidly in accordance with Phil's directions she experienced a sensation reminiscent of the occasion upon which, as a very small girl, she paid her first visit to a zoological garden and fed biscuit to strange animals.

"There! Now we'll take a proof of your work," said Phil. He threw the hot slugs upon the table and reached for the ink-roller. When he held up the proof Madeline gave a tiny shriek of dismay and Phil laughed as he would have thought it impossible to laugh an hour ago. This was what the Mergenthaler had said:

"Lost, Minday evenign a tgrand opera House? a lady8 scameo briivh. Finder will please returnj to aDvance office an dreceive rewarD."

"I'll fix it up, later on," said Phil, after their laugh was out.

"I'm afraid you'll never give me a job as compositor."

"Oh, I should n't mind teaching you."

Back they went, into the editorial room, Madeline conscious that this nonsensical diversion had made matters more difficult for herself. Candor weakened; instead of coming directly to the point, she made a quick circle around it. "And this," she said, laying her hand on the desk, "is where you think the wonderful thoughts that afterward go into the linotype machine and come out in the *Advance*!"

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"Some of them. I generally try to do a little thinking wherever I happen to be."

"Mr. Armstrong, tell me — where do you newspaper men get all the facts that you publish?"

"Why,— in all sorts of ways. By mail, telegraph, wireless, telephone, personal interview,—any old way will do."

"Oh, I know that's the way you get *news*! I am talking about *facts* — the *truth* of things, I mean."

"Same process."

"Hm! Take politics, for example. I know very little about politics, and I don't suppose I shall ever know enough to have an opinion of my very own, because when I read one side of a question it seems perfectly reasonable, and when I read the other side, I find it just as convincing. There must be truth somewhere; how are we to discover it?"

"There is part-truth on both sides of any question that is worth debating," said Phil. "The only way to acquire an opinion of your very own is by patiently examining all the evidence on both sides. There are lots of men who never take the trouble to chew these debatable questions; they depend on their favorite newspaper to hand them out a daily supply of predigested, ready-to-think opinions."

"That throws great responsibility upon the editors."

"Perhaps, but it does n't weigh very heavily upon them. The moulders of public opinion are a pretty easy-going lot of fellows in the main."

Knowing from a sentence in Mr. Allingham's letter

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that the writer had talked with Madeline, Armstrong already saw the drift of the girl's inquiry. Phil was only a very young, very impetuous insurgent editor, but he was proud as Lucifer; nothing would have induced him to ask Madeline a single leading question. He stood with folded arms, looking steadily at her, while a quickened pulse beat perceptibly in his lean, collarless neck.

“And then, about corporations,” Madeline went on. “Some newspapers make a great point of attacking corporations. Are they always sincere in their investigations and their demands for reform? Are n't they sometimes trying to draw attention from some rival interest that may be just as corrupt as the one they attack?”

“Very often,” replied Phil in his flintiest tone. “There is a lot of bluff and flim-flam in so-called newspaper reform. But that need not deter any honest man who owns an organ of public speech from raising his voice against predatory monopolies. Newspapers have a perfect right to expose fraud in high places. Not many of them dare to do it.”

“Sometimes they are — persuaded to keep still. Corporations buy them, and own them, and make the editors suppress everything that would be to their disadvantage. Is n't that so?” Madeline looked up with an imperious lift of her dimpled chin and a searching gaze of her bright eyes, the frank gaze of Anna Peck, springing from the dead past like a flower from a buried seed. “Mr. Armstrong, could *you* be silenced that way?”

“Not while there is a breath left in my body.”

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"Has any one ever tried to silence you?"

"That is neither here nor there. It could n't be done, and that's enough."

They faced each other a full minute, silently. Then Madeline turned and walked to the window beside the desk. Armstrong did not move from his position, but his eyes followed her. He felt his heartstrings snap with the strain.

When she once more faced him, there was a new dignity in her manner. She seemed to have sprung all at once to the full stature of womanhood.

"Papa was talking to me about you this morning, Mr. Armstrong," she said quietly. "He was furious over the discovery that I have been acquainted with you all Summer. He declared that he knew nothing about it until last night, though I'm sure no one has tried to conceal it from him. Some things that he said made me very indignant. He made charges against you that I could n't answer — except that I told him I did n't believe one word of them." She drew back a little before the passion that blazed from Phil's eyes, her own eyes drooping.

"Tell me some of these charges," he said rather thickly. "Perhaps I can refute them."

"They were all political — or nearly all." She darted a quick look at him; the words "uncouth barbarian," used by her father in the more personal part of his attack upon Phil, recurred to her mind. She could not altogether deny their fitness; Phil *was* a barbarian, measured by the standards of her social

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set, yet it had been partly by his Visigothic invasion of the well-worn conventions that had hedged her all her life that he had gained his mysterious sway over her imagination. “Papa says that you are a sorehead and a professional ‘knocker,’” she went on, repeating the words like a well-conned lesson. “He says that it is part of your political trade to stir up strife among party leaders, and that you are paid by your bosses for lampooning prominent men whom they wish to put out of the way. He says that you have published things in the *Advance* that would have put you in jail long ago only that your paper is not of sufficient importance to be worth prosecution. And then — he says that you have been personally insulting to *him*. He says that a few weeks ago he went to the trouble of giving you some advice which, if you had taken it, might have helped you very much and helped the cause of the Republican party in the State; but that you refused it in most offensive language —”

The girl stopped, her breath failing, her face white. Armstrong’s look would have struck terror to any one.

After a short struggle with himself the young man said slowly, “I deny that I have ever insulted your father, or used any language not fully justified by the circumstances. As for the rest, read my editorials. Read the *Advance*.”

“That’s just what I *have* been doing! After papa had gone I spent two hours looking through Uncle Dave’s file of the *Advance*. I could n’t understand much about State politics; some of the articles you have printed

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about the politicians would certainly be libellous if they were false — but how am I to tell whether they are false or true? The only things I found that seemed to affect my father were some editorials about the federal investigation of the Yakima Lumber Company. In the *Advance* for July fifteenth you say that the Yakima Company is ‘one of the most infamous frauds that has ever debauched the courts and preyed upon the public’; you say that it has been ‘systematically stealing from the government with one hand and picking the pockets of private citizens with the other.’ Now, as my father is the controlling stockholder of the Yakima, is n’t what you said the same thing as calling him a thief?”

This was a close question, and Phil balanced it carefully before replying. For the first time in his brief, exciting career as exposé of fraud in high places, he considered the personal feelings of his accuser, and defended his position with the paramount purpose of sparing Madeline so far as might be possible.

“Miss Allingham, when I wrote that editorial, and others along similar lines, I attacked a system, and not the individual men who have lent themselves to that system. If my words were strong, they were backed by facts even stronger. I am always prepared to back up any statements that appear in the *Advance*; that may be one reason why I’m not in jail. So long as monopolies like this lumber-grab continue to do business under a semblance of respectability, respectable men will be identified with them. A man may be, like your father, an exemplary gentleman in private life, and yet be

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technically a thief. We can get rid of this anomaly only by tearing the mask of respectability from transactions innately fraudulent. When this is done, honest capitalists will be obliged to range themselves on the side of square dealing, and dishonest ones will be gradually relegated to limbo. I know such a consummation is still a long way off, and it will not be much hastened by fines and injunctions, but public sentiment will solve the problem — if the human race lasts long enough! The Yakima Company, and others like it, may go on doing business at the old stand for the next fifty years, but that shall not discourage me from fighting them so long as I own a newspaper to fight with.”

He expected that Madeline would turn from him in anger, but she stood looking at him sorrowfully, earnest, self-forgetful, and so utterly lovely that it was torture to him.

“I suppose papa does these things to gain power,” she said. “It can’t be that he cares much about the money for its own sake — he never has spent money extravagantly. I don’t blame him for enjoying power. It must be fine to feel that one has control of great events and can make people — thousands of people — millions, maybe — do just as one has willed they should do. But I should think there might be ways of controlling people for their own best good.” Something in Armstrong’s look caused a quick return of Madeline’s self-consciousness and brought a blush to her cheek. “I must go,” she said. “I have stayed too long already. Mr. Armstrong, papa has forbidden me to

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recognize you any longer as an acquaintance. I have disobeyed him to-day because I wanted to give you a chance to defend yourself — and I did n't want you to misunderstand me, either. Oh, I want to be fair! — fair to papa, and fair to you, too. I am positive he has somehow gained a wrong idea of you, and that he does not really intend to be as unjust as he seems. I shall say no more to him just now — he was so displeased with the way I answered him this morning, I know it would be useless — but sometime I shall go over the whole question with him and make him admit that he did you injustice. I have a great deal of influence with my father. You need n't smile; it's true." If Phil smiled, it was at the recollection of a certain sentence in Mr. Allingham's letter — "My daughter and I are always of one mind." "I shan't rest until I have convinced him of his mistake. If I do not see you any more, you will understand that it's because I must not defy papa's authority — and don't wish to defy it, either. I shall always be your friend, and I shall never believe any evil of you, never!"

"Miss Allingham!" He unlocked his folded arms and flung them out toward her.

She retreated to the door. "You would n't shake hands with me last night because you had been moving dusty chairs," she said with an unsteady laugh. "You are ten times more grimy now."

For answer he strode forward and cut off her retreat, sweeping both her hands into his. She made no resistance; she looked down at the tense, brown,

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strongly-veined hands that hid her silk-sheathed fingers in their grasp, and she felt a strange pride in their rude strength, even a joy in their smears of printer's ink. There was something very real and convincing about this uncouth barbarian.

“You have given me more than you meant to give,” he whispered passionately. “And I'm going to keep it always — *always*; you hear?”

“Well — you must let me go now. You really must, Mr. Armstrong.”

He released her slowly, yet still held her with his determined gray eyes as she passed into the hall. At the top of the stairs she turned and looked back at him. “Good bye,” she said softly.

“Good-bye,” he answered mechanically.

He stood where she had left him, plunged in a waking dream, until the office-boy came up the stairs, attacking each step with a noisy stamp and whistling loudly by the way. Phil shook himself awake and returned to the composing-room. As he passed the table he took up the slip of paper on which he had made proof of Madeline's astonishing advertisement for the lost cameo “briivh.” With a smile, he dropped the linotype slugs into the melting-pot; but he folded the proof and put it away. He has it yet.

CHAPTER XXVI

BEFORE THE STORM

ON returning from town that afternoon Dave tiptoed to the door of his wife's room. In response to his cautious tap on the panels he was bidden, by a plaintive little voice, to "Come in"; he found Maisie lying on a couch in a pink silk kimono.

"Oh, is it you, Dave? I thought it might be Made-line, you stepped so softly." Maisie sat up on the edge of the couch, trying to smile, while Dave seated himself beside her, circling her with his arm. "Yes, my head is better; that is, it still aches some—" She became slightly incoherent as she felt her husband's keen eyes scanning her face.

"Maisie, you've been cryin'," he said plainly. "Yes, you have. And it wa'n't because your head ached, neither; you never cry for headache. Something's happened to bother you—that's what. Anything wrong with the kids? I know there ain't, though; I saw both of 'em myself, a minute ago, and they were all right. Come, Peachy! Tell your old hubby what's the matter. What else am I for, I'd like to know?"

"I—I dread to tell you about it, Dave," she hesitated, "because I know it will make you dreadfully angry. Loudon was here this morning. He talked to

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Madeline first, and after I came down stairs he talked to both of us. It was the first time I ever saw him in a passion — I did n't suppose he *could* talk so! And when Madeline stood up before him and answered him — oh, Dave, she looked just like poor sister Anna!”

“What in thunder was it all about?” frowned Dave, amazed.

“It was all about Phil Armstrong. I must say, I wish the young man had never darkened our door.”

“Ha!” A gleam of enlightenment flashed from Dave's small gray eyes. “Well, what did L. B. have to say about Phil Armstrong?”

Mrs. Stanley resketched the word-picture that Mr. Allingham had drawn of Phil's political and personal character, Dave listening in a silence that with him was always ominous. “I know nothing about Phil's politics,” said Mrs. Stanley in conclusion, “but there is only too much truth in what Loudon says about his boorish manners. I have never been able to understand why a young man with Phil's advantages — he really has had advantages, you know; a university education, and all that — should show so little social polish.”

Dave smiled cynically. “I've never noticed anything wrong with Phil's manners,” he said.

Mrs. Stanley sighed patiently, trifling with the tasselled cord of her kimono. Of course, Dave could not be expected to understand.

“I'd like to know what Loudon B. Allingham has to say for his own manners!” Dave burst forth after a moment. “Comin' to my house in my absence and

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bulldozin' a couple of women! Oh, that's the manners of a gentleman, that is! And there ain't a word of truth in what he says, neither — it's all a blame lie from beginning to end."

"Oh, hush, Dave. Suppose Belle should hear! I have n't told her a thing."

"Drat Belle! I'm perfectly willin' for her or anybody else to hear me say that this talk of Loudon Al-lingham's is a blame lie. Well, he'll answer to me for it. I'll settle with him."

"But he would n't have said such things if he had not had cause to believe them true!"

"Would n't he? That's all you know about it. He'd swear black was white, if he had an object to gain by it. What was he aimin' at, anyhow? What started him on the rampage?"

"He had just discovered that Phil has been calling at Riverside this Summer. He blames you and me for introducing him to Madeline. He says he would never have permitted such a thing if he had known. Evidently he believes that Madeline has taken a fancy to Phil — and to tell you the truth, Dave, I'm dreadfully afraid she has."

"Shucks!" said Dave. But he looked serious, nevertheless. "It's likely enough that Phil is gone on her, but that's nothing; he's in the same boat with plenty of other fellows that Madeline would n't look at twice. I think Madeline thinks a lot of John Fenton; she's thought a lot of him ever since she was a kid."

Mrs. Stanley shook her head mournfully. "If you

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had seen the way she took Phil's part this morning, you would admit that there is cause to be anxious," she replied. "I wish it *had* been John. I'd even rather that it had been Algy Sutherland. At least, Algy is a gentleman."

Again the cynical smile appeared in Dave's eyes. "It may be that Algy is a better gentleman, but I'll bet my hat that Phil is a better man, and when it comes to marryin' a fellow, that counts some. Folks might say that you did n't get much of a gentleman yourself, but no man could 've loved you truer 'n I have, Maisie."

She gave him a startled, deprecating glance. All through her married life she had posed in her own view as a superior and finely organized being, "mated to a clown"; yet in times of special perplexity she had always found it not only convenient but vastly comforting to shift the burden of decision from her own tender sensibility to Dave's rough-and-ready commonsense. And he had never failed her, not once. "Oh, Dave!" she said, sliding her slender white arm from the pink silk sleeve and clasping it around his thick, tanned neck, "you've always been kinder to me than I deserve!" And she began to weep faintly, not so much for her own undeserving condition as in physical reaction from long nervous strain.

"Good Lord!" roared Dave, greatly shocked. He drew her close to his broad breast and pressed his cheek against her lips to silence her. "You're the sweetest little wife in the world, and I'm the luckiest fellow that ever lived. Don't cry, Peachy — don't, for

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Heaven's sake. I really think you 're borrowin' trouble, so far as Madeline is concerned. As for Phil, he 'll just have to take his chances. And you can leave Loudon to me. I'll attend to *him*."

"I think it would be better to have no further discussion with Loudon, Dave," said Maisie, hastily drying her eyes. "For Madeline's sake the matter must be dropped. When she goes away, you know, it will put an end to the affair, unless it is really serious. Oh, dear! if Madeline has formed an unwise attachment while under my care, Harriet Van Alstyne will hold it over me to my dying day. She has always insinuated that I am not a competent chaperon."

"Aw, Hat Van Alstyne can just mind her own business. I guess any fellow that's good enough to be received in my house is good enough for the Allinghams. Why don't you ask Madeline right out, whether she cares anything for Phil?"

"Oh, that would never do!"

"Don't see why. I'll bet I can find out, easy enough. I'll have a little talk with her myself. Phil Armstrong is my friend, and he come here in the first place on my invitation, and I 'm not goin' to stand 'round like a mollycoddle to hear him slandered." Dave kissed Maisie and arose. "Don't you worry another bit, little woman."

"You must be very careful what you say to Madeline. And, Dave, I wish you would ask her if she put that advertisement in the paper — for my brooch, you know. I hope she did n't, because I found it a few

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minutes ago. It was caught in the fringe of my silk shawl."

Dave, half way across the room, paused and looked back. "Which paper?" he asked. "*Tribune*, or *Advance*?"

"Why — I don't know," said Mrs. Stanley, vaguely. "I've generally used the *Tribune* in advertising for seamstresses or maids. *David!* Do you suppose that Madeline —"

When his wife called him "David," Mr. Stanley usually retreated in good order. He backed toward the door, throwing up his hands. "I ain't supposin' nothin', little woman!" he protested, laughing. "Don't you worry. Madeline's got a ton of commonsense. I'll bet on Madeline, every time."

Still chuckling, he closed the door behind him. He went directly to the drawing-room, guided thither by the sound of the piano. Madeline was playing a Chopin polonaise — brilliant music, not in the least suggesting the plaint of a lovelorn maid. She ceased playing, her hands slipping from the keys in a gradual diminuendo, as Dave entered the room and took his stand beside the piano. It was unbelievable that he had come to hear the polonaise; she waited inquiringly for him to speak.

"Your Aunt Maisie has found her cameo pin, stickin' in her shawl," he announced.

"Has she, really?" The girl's taper fingers again sought the keyboard, softly running a scale up and down. "That's funny. She was so sure she dropped

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it at the opera house. I left an ad for the paper this afternoon."

Dave repeated the question he had asked up stairs. "Which paper? *Tribune* or *Advance*?"

"The *Advance*, of course."

Madeline arose from the piano bench, humming a measure of the polonaise and improvising a dance-step in time to its stately rhythm. She curtsied to Dave and then stood looking at him, her chin saucily tilted, the pose of her figure like the daring halt of a bird that knows it cannot be caught. Dave proceeded without further preamble.

"Madeline, I understand that your father has been raisin' the dooce about Phil Armstrong. It wa'n't a nice thing for him to do, and it wa'n't anyways necessary. Phil's no shyster and no bribe-taker. He's a fine boy — as straight-grained and clean a young fellow as ever lived. I wa'n't born yesterday, and I've been 'round some, and I guess I'm as good a judge of a man as your father is. You can take it from me that Philander Armstrong is *all right*."

"I've not the slightest doubt of that, Uncle Dave. I was quite sure that papa had been misinformed."

"Oh, yes, certainly — papa was misinformed," said Dave scornfully. He swallowed his wrath in silence, while Madeline stood statue-like, her chin in the air, her eyelids dropped. "All the same, my dear," he continued, "you need n't 've taken up the cudgels for Phil. I'm boss of this ranch, and if any of my friends

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needs defendin' I'll attend to it myself. Phil's nothin' to you, one way or another."

"I shall always defend *any one* who is being unjustly accused!" flashed the daughter of Anna Peck.

"Oh, well, of course that's all right enough, in a way," hedged Dave. "But it ain't worth while to bother about people you've met only a few times and likely won't ever see again, same as you would if it was an old friend like — well, like John Fenton, for instance. If it was John, now, it would be different." Dave felt that this was a master-stroke; he observed Madeline with interest to note the effect.

She smiled. "You may be sure I would n't let hard things be said of Mr. Fenton, either," she answered.

"I should hope not! But looky-here, Madeline, do you think you've been givin' John a square deal lately? Seems to me you've been flirtin' with him. Own up, now, have n't you?"

"To be sure I have," said the girl, demurely. "Who would n't if they had a chance? He's simply dandy to flirt with; he understands so perfectly how the thing should be done, and he never goes too far nor gets too sentimental."

Dave stared. "Well, I'll be —" he began; then stopped with a gulp.

Madeline danced another measure of the polonaise, her eyes brimming over with mischief.

"Now, Madeline, this ain't no laughin' matter to John," reproved Dave. "If you've let him go on all

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these years, thinkin' that maybe you 'd marry him some day —"

"Uncle Dave, how absurd! I think Mr. Fenton is the dearest old thing that ever lived, but as for marrying him — why, he 's old enough to be my father!"

"No, he ain't, neither," said Dave; adding illogically, "what if he is? That ain't nothin' against him."

There was a short silence.

"Is this all you wished to say to me, Uncle dear?" said Madeline sweetly. "Because it 's high time you were dressing for dinner."

"Yes, I guess it 's about all. Hold on a minute." She stopped in the doorway, looking back; he essayed once more to make good his proud boast that he could easily discover her sentiments. "I say, Madeline, you don't really care anything for that cub Armstrong, do you? Because you see, your auntie and I—" He stopped, suddenly conscious that he was blundering.

For a few seconds she stood motionless, her head turned over her shoulder, looking at him; then she came back across the room and paused before him. "Uncle Dave, that question of yours does n't deserve an answer," she said, "but I 'll answer it because I choose to do so. My regard for Mr. Armstrong amounts to nothing more than a wish to see him fairly treated. As for caring for any one—in the way you mean," her bosom rose with a quicker breath, her cheek glowed with a deeper color, "I don't intend to do anything of the kind for years and years to come. You need n't be the least bit afraid that I shall ever contract a

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mésalliance — I value myself much too highly for that. And I'm going to be just a *girl* as long as I possibly can!"

"Bully for you, Madeline! That's the stuff!" cried Dave, delightedly. "Oh, well — I knew there wa'n't any call to worry about it. That's what I said to your auntie a while ago; I said, 'I'll bet on Madeline, every time!'"

A subtler observer than Dave might have detected a suspicious tremor in the girl's laugh, a suspicious moisture in her bright eyes. She tripped away lightly, once more humming the polonaise; but in the doorway she halted with a sudden change of manner. "Why, Uncle Dave!" she exclaimed, "see how dark it has grown! What do you suppose is the matter?"

"Huh? What?" He strode to the door, down the hall and out into the porch, Madeline closely following. They saw that the earth was wrapped in a gloom like that of a total eclipse; descending from the sky toward the south, so close that it seemed to be pressing upon the Riverside fields, moved a mass of greenish cloud, narrowing to a point at the ground. "By George!" shouted Dave. "*That's a cyclone!*"

At the same moment John Fenton and Alfred Beverly were driving toward Rothney. Fenton had given up the day to Beverly's entertainment; had taken him for a long horseback ride in the morning, had invited several gentlemen to lunch with him, and was now finishing the afternoon with a drive. Though the weather had been gloomy enough to reduce an ordinarily cheerful person

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to dullness if not to actual despondency, Alfred had maintained a flow of gay spirits that gave old-time zest to the morning ride with Jack and marked the luncheon-party as an incident of pleasant memory; on approaching Rothney at five o'clock he made his first unfavorable comment upon the weather. "I don't pretend to be an authority upon weather in this part of the world," he remarked, "but it seems to me that those clouds in the south have rather an ugly look."

"So they have," agreed Fenton. "I wish we had turned back sooner."

"Anything cyclonic in the conditions?"

"There is plenty of raw material for a cyclone, but it may not work up into the finished article. Sometimes the most threatening clouds do nothing but threaten."

"It's a sinister prospect, to say the least."

Beverly's word, though carelessly spoken, was well chosen. Grim foreboding sat in all quarters of the compass; not a ray of hope shone in any direction, not an avenue of escape lay open; the gracious arch of heaven was malignly flattened by a slate-colored, green-fringed canopy that settled slowly, inch by inch, toward the defenceless prairie. An electrical half-light prevailed, in which the sorrel-grown wheat stubble reddened like a field of blood and the shaven yellow oats-fields seemed balefully self-luminous.

"It would make a fine study for a Last Judgment, if one had the skill to put it on canvas," said Beverly, contemplating the scene with genuine artistic enjoyment. "'Death is struck, and Nature quaking.' What

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peculiar cloud effects you do get in a flat country! It seems as if a fellow could put up his hand and touch these clouds."

Fenton drove like Jehu, looking straight ahead, and taking a short cut across some fields; his runabout tore through the stubble with a noise like the rush of crackling flames. Suddenly he checked the horse, and in the midst of an almost palpable silence the runabout stood at rest. The cloud-canopy still settled steadily, inch by inch.

"What now, Jack?"

"I was just wondering," Fenton turned in the seat and swept a comprehensive glance around, "if we'd better get over to Hogan's yonder, instead of trying to reach town. If it's a wind-storm, we're as safe here in the open as anywhere, but if it's a cloud-burst I'd as lief be under cover. What do you say, Fred?"

"Oh, let's strike for town," said Alfred. "We might be tied up at that farm all night." Fenton let out the rein and Bob leaped forward again, spurning the uneven ground with his flying hoofs. "Magnificent pace! And you say he was bred on the Lorimer farm, down in old Kentucky? Ah, there's nothing like the mettle of the blue-grass pasture!"

"This is n't the horse you rode this morning," said Fenton in an odd tone. "This is Bob, a common 'bronch' without a pedigree, and he was raised in Wardner County, less than a hundred miles from Rothney."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Beverly, incredulously; and

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while Fenton convinced him by a brief history of the broncho, Bob, as if aware that his reputation was at stake, stretched his slender neck in a gallant race with the advancing storm.

The broncho won by a length. As the runabout jumped the railroad track and dashed up Main Street, it passed unheeded by the groups of bareheaded men and women who stood on the sidewalk, all gazing in one direction. It was now very dark, but through the darkness shone an undertone of refraction, like the glow from some Vulcanian forge.

"I'll drive the horse into the stable," said Fenton, "and then we can decide on the safest place of shelter for ourselves."

Beverly stepped from the runabout at the entrance to Gray's Livery, and walked up to the corner of Third Street. Fenton was inside the stable less than a minute, but in that minute everything happened. Rushing forth, he found the groups of men and women scattering hither and thither in panic. At the corner of Third and Main Streets stood Alfred Beverly in characteristic pose, with his left hand at his side where the jewelled sword-hilt might have been, his hat held in his right hand, his thin auburn curls given an extra backward toss by the wind, his eyes fixed in fascination upon the approaching cloud.

"Fred!" cried Fenton, loudly. "*Fred!*" As well try to shout down the thunder of Niagara.

On came the cloud, swooping earthward like a bird of prey, clawing great furrows in the ground, tearing

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off roofs with the beat of its inky wings. Mingled with its nameless roar was a medley of terrible sounds — splinter of timbers, shiver of glass, the thud of things violently thrown, the confusion of human voices. Dust . . . darkness . . . chaos. . . .

CHAPTER XXVII

“THE CYCLONE STRUCK BOTHERNEY”

ALICE DELAMERE, writing beside her window, noticed the increasing darkness only through the inconvenience that it caused, and even then attributed it partly to the thick-branching cottonwood that hid the sky from her view. She drew the table closer to the window; she ran the holland shade to the top of the sash and looped back the muslin curtains, and still could barely trace the course of her pen across the page. Then, hearing Mrs. Bowen call to her in agitated tones, she turned in sudden, indefinable alarm and felt her way through the deep twilight that had poured into the room.

“Where *are* you, Alice?” called Mrs. Bowen a second time. “Hurry! That’s an awful cloud coming over. We must get down cellar’s quick’s we can!”

Mrs. Bowen summoned Christine from her ironing-table and Chan from the hammock on the veranda, and pausing only to close doors and windows on the way she marshalled her little household toward the cellar stairs.

“I don’t want to go down sullen!” grumbled Chan. He held his book under his arm, with a finger shut inside to mark the page at which he had reluctantly left off reading. Mrs. Bowen took him gently by the

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shoulder and placed him in front of her, and thus the procession marched from the overheated kitchen to the chill darkness of the basement.

"Get right into this corner, all of you," ordered Mrs. Bowen. "This is the direction the cloud is coming from."

"Does Mrs. Bowen tank et ben a real secklone?" fluttered Christine.

"It may be just a heavy wind," said Mrs. Bowen, bravely, though her voice shook. "There it comes!"

The gale struck the house with the shock of a solid projectile; the walls trembled, the timbers creaked, and a few lumps of mortar fell rattling from the foundation, but the sturdy structure held its own. The wind rushed on, its booming roar edged at the top by a shrill cry, weird as the call of the Banshee.

"I—I guess we're saved, praise the Lord!" Mrs. Bowen's fervent exclamation was scarcely audible above the noise. "If the house stood the first stroke, it's not likely to go to pieces now. I wonder where Otto was? I declare, I did n't have time to think of Otto."

"He's out in the wagon-house, mendin' harness," said Chan, in a tone distinctly envious. He coughed slightly as he spoke.

"Land sakes! I'd ought to 've had you put on your jacket, Chan! Here!" Mrs. Bowen pulled off her white apron, and much to Chan's disgust, wrapped it around his shoulders.

"It's no good to go down sullen, anyways," he protested. "The best thing is to lay flat on the ground,

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outdoors, and grab a-holt of the grass. Mr. Fenton says so."

"I've always gone down cellar in wind storms, and I always shall," said Mrs. Bowen, conclusively. "Alice, how quiet you are, dear! Was you scared?"

"You hardly gave me time for that, Aunt Julia," said Alice, returning the clasp of the motherly hand that sought hers in the darkness. "I do wish I had seen the cloud!"

"It was terr'ble, the worst I've seen in years."

"Tain't no cyclone, though," persisted Chan.

"You don't know whether it is or not. You may well be thankful that the roof was n't taken right off from over your head. Hark! Is that rain? Yes, it's raining. The worst danger's past."

The refugees filed back to the kitchen, Chan heading the procession this time. They found one of the windows blown in and the rain dashing torrentially through the room. After the flood had been partially stayed by fastening Christine's ironing-blanket across the aperture, the three women and the boy took observations through another window. So far as could be seen the barn and sheds stood in their usual places. Several of Aaron Bowen's best trees had been uprooted and flung down; a large chicken-coop sat squarely in the middle of the front lawn.

When the rain began to slacken, a clumping of boots announced the appearance of Otto Erickson at the shed-door. He entered the kitchen and looked around with

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an amiable grin. "Va—all, dot ben pooty big stahr—rm," he remarked dispassionately.

"Where were you, Otto? Did you see the cloud?"

"Ya-a. I ben in vaggin-house. Ya-a, I see da cloud. He com op from da sout'-vest, so—" the Swede sawed his arm through the air with a meaningless gesture, "dann he go off nort'vest, leck dat. He ben pooty bad-lukin' cloud."

"Do you think 't was a cyclone?" asked Chan.

"Ya-a. I tank so," said Otto, placidly.

"We did n't get the worst of it, then," said Mrs. Bowen.

"Na-a. Ve don'd get da vorst," drawled Otto, shaking his head. "Ofer dot vay," another sawing gesture, "dot ben da vorst."

Mrs. Bowen was silent for a moment. "Well, Otto," she said, with the air of having resolved not to borrow trouble, "it's a mercy we're all safe and sound *here*. You'd better get 'round quick 's you can and look after the stock. One of the chicken-coops is in the front yard. It looks like the one you had the young Leg-horns in. Poor things! I expect they were all killed."

Otto nodded philosophically.

"And you must hunt up some boards to close this kitchen window over night. The glass is all gone."

"Ya-a. I fend som. I yust com to get my renn-coat." He was drenched to the skin by his trip from the wagon-shed to the house, but having no sense of humor he was perfectly serious as he took his rubber

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coat from its peg in the outer kitchen and slipped it on over the wet shirt that adhered tightly to his shoulder-blades.

Alice went to a front window of the living-room, a new alarm stirred in her mind by Otto's vague description of the cloud. The storm had spared Willow Branch; but whence had it come, and whither had it gone? Its fury might indeed have been spent on empty air and open plain; yet as Alice looked out upon the twisted, prostrate trees that had been swept aside as by the mere hem of a garment, she dared not think what might be lying under the actual tread of the storm.

Supper was late, Christine having been obliged to mop the flooded floors and pantry shelves before she could begin preparations for the evening meal. The disheartening odor of wet wood and water-soaked plaster penetrated to the dining-room in advance of the savory fragrance of tea and toast. Christine looked tired and cross as she set the old-fashioned fat silver teapot at her mistress' elbow.

Chan rushed in, pale and gasping. "Oh, Mrs. Bowen!" he cried. "There's a man just ridden through from Northbury, takin' the shortcut down the Branch, and he says the cyclone struck Rothney and wiped out the town — a lot of people killed! Oh, can't I have the horse and go see if it's so?"

The three women stood transfixed. "A man from Northbury?" repeated Mrs. Bowen, the color forsaking her round, wholesome face. "How could he know

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what had happened in Rothney? He would n't go near Rothney, coming down the Branch.”

“He says he met a man who told him. Oh, *can't* I go?”

“No, no, Chan, of course not! Mercy on us! Christine, call to Otto and tell him to hitch up Sally. I'll drive to town myself.”

“And lemme go 'long?” urged Chan.

“No, no.” Mrs. Bowen sank into her chair, her eyes meeting those of the girl who stood white and erect at the side of the table. “Miss Alice will go with me, and you'll stay quietly where you are, like a good boy. Sit down, Alice, child. We'll have time to eat a bite while Otto is hitching up.” She arranged the tea-cups before her, the china jingling in her nervous fingers.

Chan slid into his chair and silently devoured a piece of toast, washing it down with a glass of milk, while Mrs. Bowen and Alice made a heroic effort to eat supper just as usual.

“Like as not,” said Mrs. Bowen, “that man from Northbury was trying to tell a big story. The town is gen'rally ‘wiped out’ in the first account you get of these things. The storm may not have been a bit worse in Rothney than it was here at Willow Branch.”

At the first sound of wheels on the drive, as Otto brought the phaeton to the door, Mrs. Bowen arose. “Run and put on your things, Alice,” she said; but the girl was out of the room before the words were fairly spoken.

“Lemme go, too?” pleaded Chan again.

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"It would n't be safe," replied Mrs. Bowen, firmly. "It's real chilly since the rain, and night coming on, too. If you was to go out and catch cold, it might make you real sick again. Be a good boy, now."

Chan threw his arm across his eyes and sobbed aloud. "I want t-to go and see if Mr. Fenton's been k-killed!" he wailed.

Mrs. Bowen turned away with a catch of her breath, and took her everyday bonnet and cape from the cupboard in the living-room. Tying on the bonnet with scant concern as to its probable angle she hurried out to the phaeton, throwing the cape around her shoulders as she went. Alice ran down stairs, wrapped in a long coat, with a silk scarf tied over her hair. Chan straightened up, dashing the back of his hand across his eyes; he did not wish Miss Alice to think him a "baby." "I think it's darn mean I can't go 'long," he said belligerently.

"Quite out of the question, Chan. Be patient, and don't worry. As Mrs. Bowen says, the storm may have been no worse in town than here. And — Mr. Fenton may have been as safe as we were."

Alice patted the boy's shoulder reassuringly. If she had appeared really unconcerned, Chan would have bitterly resented her hopeful words, but he knew well enough that she was trying to keep up her own courage as well as his, and he determined to be no whit behind her. "Y-yes 'm," he sniffed. "I guess you'll find Mr. Fenton was all right."

Sally, sleek and well-favored, stood adjusting the bit

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to her mouth and turning her head, with her usual lofty air, to scrutinize the two women as they stepped into the phaeton in which they had taken so many peaceful, jogging drives across the prairie. “You may drive, Alice,” said Mrs. Bowen. “I’m too shaky.”

Alice put the mare forward at her best pace. Sally shied now and then at the broken branches that strewed the cottonwood lane, but Alice kept her at a run and for once Mrs. Bowen took no account of possible danger. The roads had been heavily washed by the rain, and every little hollow was a glimmering pool; the small, sharp sickle of a young moon pierced the black cloud that still hung low in the west, and overhead the stars were beginning to twinkle. Around the corner of Nelson’s grove many evidences of the storm became apparent in the clear gray twilight — here a pasture fence of which alternate sections had been levelled, there a wood-pile packed with straw from a distant stack; yonder a farmhouse whose walls were shuffled together like a pack of cards, while the barn, a hundred feet away, stood intact with all the shingles smoothly peeled from its roof. A wheat field which this noon had been filled with shocks now lay bare as a floor, its Summer’s yield blown no one knows whither. Here and there were spots that the wind had left untouched in its mad leap over the plain.

“There is no light in Rothney!” exclaimed Alice. “The town is absolutely *dark!*”

“That’s so,” murmured Mrs. Bowen. “It’s past the hour for turning on the lights, too.” She clutched

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Alice's arm. "What is that streak of light, just beyond Dickson's Coulee?"

"I can't make it out from here," replied Alice, whose distant vision was less keen than Mrs. Bowen's. The phaeton swerved through a puddle, with a slight splash, and rushed on.

"Oh, it's the flyer!" cried Mrs. Bowen. "It's Number Nine from St. Paul. It's on the siding. It must be that they can't take it up to the station. Mercy on us!"

She was right. The transcontinental express lay in its twinkling length along the siding, the mighty locomotive quietly simmering. On reaching the wagon-bridge, which crossed the coulee a stone's throw from the railroad trestle, Alice had her hands full with the old mare. If Number Nine had been flying along as usual Sally would have let it pass with no comment beyond a momentary curve of her haunches and prick of her ears, but now, knowing instinctively that something was amiss, she charged the bridge at a thunderous gallop. It was impossible to stop and question the men who stood about the halted train, impossible to do more than guide the phaeton safely across the bridge and out into the stretch of road that ran side by side with the railroad track for the remainder of the way to town.

Nearing the depot yards, Sally, exhausted by her unusual exertions, slowed to a walk. A man was walking briskly along the track in the direction of the train. He wore a tourist-cap which he lifted with a courteous gesture as Mrs. Bowen timidly addressed him.

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“Do you know how much damage was done in the town? Were — were many people killed?”

“Why, I understand there was only one man killed,” the gentleman said, his tone sounding the cheerful note of the migrant. “There is no end of damage to buildings. One of the streets — I think they called it Third Street — is a total wreck. The electric plant is disabled, so they can’t get much light on the subject. There’s a terrible mix-up at the depot — freight-cars thrown around in every direction and the station-building itself turned face downward across both tracks. Our conductor has pulled up on the siding to wait until the wrecker can get here from Grantham. The wires are all down, but a man has been sent on horseback somewhere to telephone for the wrecker. Yes, it is a marvel that there was not more loss of life.”

The stranger passed on. Sally pulled herself together and went forward languidly. Mrs. Bowen and Alice were silent. The tourist’s phrase, “only one man killed,” implied the miraculous escape of many; yet who was that one man? Neither of the two women dared ask the question aloud.

Progress from this point was rendered slow and difficult by fallen trees and half-hidden masses of *débris*. Alice finally gained access to Main Street, which by virtue of its extreme width was less impassable than the narrower thoroughfares. The Hotel Kenney and two or three stores were feebly illuminated by oil lamps that had been hastily pressed into the service. In front

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of the drug store at the corner of Sixth Street, a crowd was dispersing.

"Stop a minute, Alice," said Mrs. Bowen. "Let's see if this man can tell us anything."

The man, who stood watching the crowd break up, turned his head and replied to Mrs. Bowen's question without removing his hands from his pockets.

"They thought the fellow was dead when they took him out of the wreck, but he come to after the doctor'd been workin' over him a while. They kerried him out on a stretcher a little while ago. No'm, I don't know who he was. I'm a stranger here myself — just come here to-day to work on a threshin'-job. I say, Bill, who was that fellow that got hurt?"

The fellow-thresherman addressed — also a stranger — answered carelessly, "I did n't hear nobody say the name. They've took him to the place where he rooms, to a Mr. Leroy's house."

Mrs. Bowen fell back, speechless. Alice made no sound, but Mrs. Bowen felt the trembling of the girl's slender form at her side. "Alice — Alice, dear!" she whispered, putting an arm around her. "We must go to him. If we can't drive, we can get out and *walk*."

"I'll — I'll find a way to drive," said Alice, in a stifled tone.

The way proved slow and tortuous, but by driving up an alley and across one or two dooryards Alice at last reached Bellevue Avenue, the aristocratic precincts of which had apparently escaped with little damage beyond the loss of a few trees. On the boulevard in front of

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Mr. Leroy's house stood a lantern, by the light of which could be seen a spring wagon backed against the curb. As Mrs. Bowen's phaeton crept toward the spot two men came out of the house, carrying something that looked like a door; they picked up the lantern, slid the door into the wagon, climbed to the seat and drove off in the opposite direction. The phaeton came creeping on, and paused at the spot where the wagon had stood a moment before.

The outside front door was open; through the half-glass of the inner door streamed the faint light of a small lamp that had been borrowed from the kitchen and placed upon the hall table. Mrs. Bowen and Alice entered immediately upon ringing the bell, and were met in the hall by Mr. Leroy. He was a very feeble old man, and almost totally deaf; though pale and distraught, he nodded a friendly welcome. “Come right into the settin'-room,” he said. “Marthy's layin' on the sofy. She's had a bad spell with her heart, Marthy has.”

Mrs. Bowen followed the old gentleman into the sitting-room. Alice essayed to do likewise, but at the foot of the stairs she paused, her strength failing, and caught at the newel-post with both hands. She had heard voices in the upper hall,—men's voices. Dr. Crane came running down with the boyish agility that always seemed so inappropriate to his years, passed Alice with a hasty bow, and went out at the front door. She made no response to his greeting; with her face white as ivory in the dim lamplight she gazed up the steep stairs

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to the man who stood at the top — John Fenton, alive and unhurt — Fenton himself, looking rather pale but as calm and resourceful as usual.

Alice clung desperately to the newel-post while the stairway apparently swung around her in a circle. A sound like the rushing of many waters filled her ears; after an interval in which she felt as if cast into the trough of a heavy sea, came a feeling of peace, and safety, and sure anchorage. She heard Fenton's voice, from an indefinite distance, like an echo.

"Poor little girl! I would have spared you this shock if there had been any chance to send you word. Alfred is not dangerously injured. There is no cause for alarm, none whatever."

Slowly she opened her eyes. Her head was on Fenton's shoulder, and his arm was close around her. At first she did not wonder at this, nor question that it ought to be so. "How — how was he hurt?" she asked, her eyes closing again.

"He was caught in the wreck of the new Methodist Church. He was standing on the corner of Third and Main Streets when the wind struck the church. He has a broken arm, a splintered rib, and several ugly bruises, but Dr. Crane is positive that there are no internal injuries. You may set your mind at rest — Fred will certainly get well."

"Oh!" she sighed. "We thought — we understood —"

"I know — of course, you were naturally very anxious. I couldn't leave Fred myself, but I sent Ole

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Carlson with a message as soon as he could be spared. Did you meet him on the road?”

“No.” The sound of Mr. Leroy’s toddling foot-step startled Alice into a clearer consciousness of Fenton’s supporting arm. She drew herself away, a faint color stealing over her blanched cheek. Fenton kept her hand in his, hardly trusting her strength as yet; his look betrayed the tension under which he was laboring.

“Mrs. Bowen is here, I suppose,” he said.

Alice nodded. Together they walked down the hall to the sitting-room door; there he let her hand slip from his, and returned quickly upstairs, followed by Mr. Leroy.

Mrs. Leroy lay on the sofa with a shawl over her, her thin gray hair wandering in wisps about her chalky face. She had been alone in the house when the tornado struck, her husband having gone down town. On his return he had found her in an alarming condition; she was much better now, though she still breathed with difficulty, her hand pressed to her heart. Mrs. Bowen sat beside her, bathing her forehead with alcohol. She looked across at Alice, eloquently; she had already learned from Mrs. Leroy that it was not John, but John’s friend, who had been brought home on a stretcher.

“They — said — the shock was the worst thing,” Mrs. Leroy was saying as Alice entered. “The doctor says he has a weak heart. Poor young man! I know what that means.” She pressed her hand more tightly to her fluttering side.

“Now, Mrs. Leroy, you just stop thinking about

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that young man," advised Mrs. Bowen, dabbing the alcohol with energy. "From all accounts he's not badly hurt, and it's the greatest mercy he was n't killed. You lie back and take things easy."

Mr. Leroy re-entered the sitting-room and approached the sofa with an apologetic air. "I hate to bother ye, Marthy," he said, "but John wants some more pillows for Mr. Beverly, and I don't just know where they be."

"Why, Thomas, I think you 'll find them in the little cupboard at the end of the hall — not the linen-closet, but —"

"I know where you mean, Mrs. Leroy," said Mrs. Bowen, handing the alcohol bottle to Alice. "Shan't I go up and get 'em for John?"

"So do, Mrs. Bowen. I guess John will be pleased to have some help."

Alice took Mrs. Bowen's place beside the sofa. Mrs. Leroy looked up at her, smiling dimly as she felt the soothing stroke of the girl's cool finger-tips on her forehead. Mr. Leroy hovered near in a daze of helpless anxiety, while the old clock in the corner tick-tocked the minutes with deliberate iteration. Alice heard Mrs. Bowen's voice, and Fenton's, in the room above, and once she heard Alfred speaking in his quick, imperious way.

Suddenly a bright thought struck Mr. Leroy. "Marthy," he said, "had n't ye better take some o' them strychnine pills that ye had from the doctor?"

"Why, yes, Thomas, that would be a good idea,"

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answered his wife, brightening also. “It’s so long since I took any, I’d forgot I had ’em. You know where the box is, Thomas?”

The old gentleman hurried away, delighted to be of service, but when he came back with the box in one hand and a glass of water in the other, his face had lengthened. “There’s only one pill left, Marthy,” he said. “You take it, and I’ll go over to the drug store and get some more before it’s time to take another.”

“Let me go, Mrs. Leroy,” said Alice. “Mrs. Bowen’s horse is at the door, and I can drive down to the drug store as well as not.”

She succeeded in persuading the old people to accept her offer of assistance, and went out of the house, glad to be alone for a few minutes. She was not destined to be alone long, however; Fenton came down the walk from the house just as she unfastened Sally’s hitching-rein.

“Where are you going, Miss Delamere?” he asked in surprise. “The drug store? I was starting for the drug store myself. You’d better let me go with you — the streets are so blocked that it is not very easy driving.”

She allowed him to take his place beside her in the phaeton. Not until they were moving slowly down the street did it occur to her that she need not have come, that Fenton could have attended to Mrs. Leroy’s errand as well as his own. But she could not regret being here at his side; there was something inexpressibly comforting in the mere fact of his presence.

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He leaned forward, keeping a sharp watch on the road. Sally arched her neck against the taut rein, picking her steps warily, while the phaeton swayed over elastic green boughs that billowed unseen about the wheels. "Which way did you drive, in coming up here?" Fenton asked.

"I don't know," Alice replied. Had her life depended upon it she could not have retraced that circuitous route through dooryards and alleys.

"There are advantages in the fact that the electric plant was knocked out at the first blow. There's no danger of running up against live wires. Did you get much of the storm at Willow Branch?"

"Some trees were uprooted. The buildings were not hurt. Is it true that every one in Rothney escaped?"

"Several people were slightly injured, I believe, but no one seriously. I know very little about the condition of the town; I've been with Alfred every moment since — since it happened." Fenton's quiet tone expressed a keen and solemn sense of the recent event — its deathly danger and miraculous deliverance — and a marked reluctance to talk about it.

He did not speak again until they drew up at the drug store, when he said merely, "I'll not be long," handing the reins to Alice as he swung over the low step of the phaeton.

Many shops were open on Main Street, though few people were buying anything but lamps and candles, for which the demand exceeded the supply. Rothney had already rebounded, with true Western buoyancy,

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from the shock of its narrow escape. Had the humblest member of the community lost his life in the tornado, the survivors would have mourned as one household; all being saved alive, they compared notes on their material losses in a manner that to Alice seemed almost frivolous. While awaiting Fenton's return she heard the question, "Where were *you* when the cyclone struck?" answered with every possible variation and elaboration by the passers-by. Men, women, and children who had been paralyzed by terror at the moment the cloud appeared were now glibly circumstantial in their account of the sensations peculiar to that supreme moment.

"It will take a little time to put up Mrs. Leroy's prescription," said Fenton, stepping into the phaeton, "so we may as well drive down to Third Street and look at the wreck. I daresay it will be too dark to see much."

The jagged outlines of the wreck were indeed hardly more than suggestive against the gray evening sky. Buildings alternately leaned forward as if peering fearfully up the street, or shrank backward on their foundations like frightened horses on their haunches; every phase of apprehension seemed caricatured by the grotesque cant of tilted walls and caved roofs. "It looks like the work of a genuine 'twister,'" said Fenton. "I suspect its force was mainly spent before it reached Rothney."

"Is this the Methodist Church?" asked Alice, looking incredulously at the mass of wreckage that shelved

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far out into the street. "Oh, how dreadful! And it was to have been dedicated next Sunday!"

"Yes. It is a strange fatality. The building was insured against fire, but there was no tornado insurance. It was a good building, too, far better than many others that escaped."

"That great heap across the street — was that where — where Alfred —"

"Yes," said Fenton. He turned Sally's head and drove up Main Street.

A youth in a Western-Union cap was approaching the corner when Fenton came out of the drug store with Mrs. Leroy's prescription. The boy quickened his step to a run. "I've been chasing all over town for you, Mr. Fenton," he said. "Jim took this off the wire just before the cyclone struck us. We've been so busy since, trying to find out where we were at, that we have n't tried to deliver any messages. Is there an answer? We've got a wire working to Rainsford, and can relay to Northbury until the Grantham connection is repaired."

"I will come over later to send a reply," said Fenton.

He crushed the paper in his hand before thrusting it into his pocket. He looked so sorrow-stricken that Alice forebore questioning him; but after a moment he answered the silent inquiry of her earnest eyes. "The message is from Lottie Hayward. Jeff has gone — died last night."

"Oh — I am so sorry!"

There was a long silence, while Fenton guided the

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phaeton in a slow zigzag course up Main Street to Dacotah Avenue. "Last night," he repeated musingly. "At nine-thirty, Lottie says. That would make it about the time our people were shouting themselves hoarse at the anniversary meeting; while that was going on, Jeff was dying! Ah, well!" He pulled a heavy sigh. "He was a hero, and one may be sure he died game."

In and out, among prostrate telephone poles, the phaeton made its cautious way.

"Jeff's courage has humbled and inspired me as nothing else ever did," Fenton went on as if thinking aloud. "He loved life, and lived it to the full. There are few men, having as much to live for as he had, who could face death so bravely. I know *I* could n't do it."

"Yes, you could! You are brave enough for anything!"

Alice hardly knew what prompted her impulsive words. She felt that Fenton turned toward her in the darkness, and that his face bent nearer hers; in another moment, perhaps, the flimsy barrier that had arisen between them would have been torn aside, but the opportunity was rudely snatched away. They were now on Dacotah Avenue, with no light but the distant glow of the stars; a light vehicle, driven rapidly from the opposite direction, bore down on Mrs. Bowen's phaeton, narrowly escaping collision. The driver pulled up with a shout, his horse rearing from the sudden check. It was Dave Stanley who spoke.

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"Oh, is it you, John? What the devil do you mean by creepin' along so quiet? I did n't hear a sound of you. Oh, how-de-do, Miss Delamere! Beg your pardon, I'm sure; I did n't mean to run you down."

"I thought you went home an hour ago, Dave."

"Well, so I did. I went back to let m' wife know how the land lay, but I come up again to see if there was anything I could do to help out. Guess there ain't much that can be done till morning. I understand Mr. Beverly is gettin' along fine."

"Yes, he is quite comfortable now. He will probably feel the effects of shock for some hours."

"Doc Crane says his heart-action ain't any too good. I was talkin' with Doc a minute ago. He says that if Beverly had been left layin' under that wreck five minutes longer he'd 've been dead, sure."

"Well, he was n't left there, so it's all right," said Fenton. He glanced at Alice, but in the darkness he could not judge the effect of Dave's blunt speech.

"All the same, I guess it was just as well for him that you did n't wait for them fellows to get back with that crow-bar," said Dave. "Was it the ridge-pole of the church roof that struck the barber-shop first and held up the rest of the stuff? That's what Ole Carlson thought. He said the timbers seemed to be built 'round Beverly like a crate, and that was what kep' him from bein' crushed."

"No, the roof went over into the yard of the Farmers' Mill. It was the pulpit-desk that saved Mr. Beverly. It happened to fall across him, without touching him,

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at such an angle that it supported the weight above. It is of solid oak, you know, and very strong.”

“You don’t say.” Dave’s tone was unexclamatory but deeply appreciative. “Hm. That beats all. And as I understand it, you put your shoulder under a beam that sort o’ gave the key to the combination, as it were, and you heaved it up and held it by your own main strength while the other fellows got at Beverly and pulled him out? That’s what Ole said.”

“Oh — I don’t know!” said Fenton, restively. “Yes — I believe we did it in some such way.”

“Well, that’s the time *you* did a great stunt, m’ son,” said Dave, solemnly. “It makes Samson look faded.”

“Where is Madeline? Did she go home?” asked Fenton with obvious desire to change the subject.

“Not yet. I left her up at Judge Wilton’s. Say, from what Phil Armstrong says, the *Advance* office must’ve had a pretty close squeak. He says there ain’t a shingle left on the roof nor a whole light o’ glass in any o’ the windows. His press wa’n’t hurt, though, nor the Mergenthaler. Oh, it was a twister, all right — I knew that the minute I sighted the cloud. It was headin’ for Riverside then — would’ve raked Willow Branch, too, if it had kep’ its course — but it veered to the northwest, and then I knew Rothney was up against it. Soon ’s the cloud had gone over I tried the telephone — did n’t work, of course. And then I hitched my horse; when I got ready to start, there was that sassy Madeline, in her waterproof coat, and nothin’ would do but I must take her along. Guess we were

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the first outsiders to put in an appearance. Judge Wilton asked us if we'd caught a hitch on the cyclone and blown into town behind it. Well, I guess I'll slide around to the Judge's and see if Madeline's ready to go home. Good evening, Miss Delamere. So long, John."

Dave drew the rein-straps tight in his stoutly gloved hands and shot away into the darkness. Fenton drove on up the shadowy lane of Dacotah Avenue, entering Bellevue Avenue from the north, beyond the region of the storm's worst ravage. On reaching Mr. Leroy's house, Alice spoke.

"Mr. Fenton, you saved Mr. Beverly's life. I felt sure of it before I heard what Mr. Stanley said. It was like you to do just what you did. It was what I should have expected —"

He turned upon her with one of those volcanic bursts of fury that on rare occasions broke through his habitual self-control. "For God's sake, don't *thank* me!" he cried bitterly.

She drew back from him, and she did not look at him again as they passed into the house.

Several neighbors having come to Mrs. Leroy's assistance by this time, Mrs. Bowen and Alice went home. "I think I'll come back to-morrow morning, though," said Mrs. Bowen as they jogged along, Sally choosing her own pace now. "Mrs. Leroy's just let her girl go up home on a vacation, so she's all alone with that big house and the lodgers to look after. She's not able to do the work, let alone take care of Mr. Beverly.

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He seems to feel real cheerful; I don't b'lieve he knows that his life was in any danger. But Mrs. Leroy says he was unconscious nearly an hour. I don't see how they ever managed to get him out of that wreck before he was smothered to death.”

“Mr. Fenton did it,” said Alice. “He put his shoulder under a great beam and lifted it and held it until Mr. Beverly could be taken out. He did what no one else had the strength or the courage to attempt.”

Mrs. Bowen did not reply at once. “Well, Alice,” she said at last, “the Lord stren'thened him for it — you may be sure of that. It was n't *human* stren'th.”

CHAPTER XXVIII

REVELATION

THE town of Rothney rose to the occasion of its sudden calamity, wresting therefrom an opportunity to prove its public spirit. In less than twenty-four hours an energetic beginning had been made on the work of bringing order from the dire confusion that the tornado had left in its wake. The building committee of the First Methodist Church went into special executive session and came forth a rebuilding committee with a full and definite plan for immediate action; and the most active member of this committee was Mayor John Fenton, the busiest man in town.

The mass-meeting proposed by Andrew Hays was called by the mayor on the following Thursday evening. It was a less festive but no less earnest gathering than the one that had packed the opera house on Monday, a roll-call to which men responded in their working-clothes. The commercial club was organized, with Andrew Hays as president and Philander Armstrong as head of the publicity department; and at the conclusion of the meeting several hundred "booster" buttons which Phil had had inscribed with the motto "We, not They," were distributed to the dispersing crowd.

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Edward Kenney did not attend the mass-meeting. In fact, he left Rothney that very evening, on a business trip to St. Paul.

With whimsical patience Alfred Beverly endured the pain and tedium of those first few days, persistently making light of his injuries. He was a sweet-tempered but rather exacting invalid, who could keep any number of persons busy waiting upon him. His condition not being serious enough to require the services of a professional nurse, he was cared for at night by his old friend John Fenton, while through the day several ladies, neighbors of Mrs. Leroy, vied with each other in anticipating his wants and in beguiling the long hours by listening while he talked. Alice Delamere came to see him every morning. She felt sincerely sorry for his suffering and sincerely thankful for his speedy recovery; she could not help admiring his gallant cheerfulness, and mingled with all her other emotions there was a tinge of self-reproach when she recalled the dark hour of suspense in which her anxiety had been so concentrated upon John Fenton that she had not once thought of Alfred Beverly.

Alfred chided her gently for the brevity of her visits. "You are like the sunshine that peeps into this north window of mine," he said. "I watch for its coming—it stays but a moment, slips to the door, and vanishes—gone till to-morrow! I can no more detain it than I can keep *you*." To which Alice replied with her chiming little laugh, "Is n't that rather fortunate? If the sunshine remained stationary all day, you would know

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that something had gone radically wrong with the universe."

Alice saw Fenton several times during the week, but always briefly or at a distance. If he happened to be in Alfred's room when she came with Mrs. Bowen to pay her morning visit, he promptly withdrew. He imagined her sitting at Fred's side by the hour, reading poetry to him, perhaps (a thing she never did) or talking with him about the affairs of the literary world in which they had long been compatriots, that world so different from his own and so far removed from it. He did not realize the frigidity of his manner in his chance meetings with Alice; determined to leave the field clear for Fred to prove his prior claim — or disprove it — he unconsciously overdid the part he had chosen to play. Naturally, Alice was displeased, knowing less than half the motives that shaped his conduct; and so the distance widened between them, day by day.

Coming to Beverly's room Saturday morning, Mrs. Bowen and Alice found the invalid sitting up, fully dressed to the last nicety of fashionable lounge-attire. Fenton sat beside him, and the two were talking in a particularly lively strain. At the entrance of the ladies, Fenton arose and bowed with sudden gravity, stepping into the background.

"Oh, I'm almost well this morning!" declared Beverly, who had left his easy-chair and advanced to meet his visitors. "Feel fine and fit as can be." Still holding Alice's right hand with his left, he led her to a chair facing his own. There was something peculiarly

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winning in the graceful, deprecatory gestures of that left hand; his right arm was slung across his breast in a black silk handkerchief, the empty sleeve smoothly tucked into the slanting side-pocket of his two-button 'Varsity jacket. "Yes," he said, smiling, as he resumed his chair. "I expect to start for New York Monday night. What do you say to that?"

Mrs. Bowen shook her head. "I say it's a risk," she replied, folding her hands upon the snowy expanse of her nainsook apron.

"Are you sure you are strong enough for the journey?" asked Alice. She involuntarily referred the question to Fenton by a glance; but he, standing with one hand on the back of Beverly's chair, said nothing and looked nothing in reply.

"Well, I shall travel under especially favorable auspices," said Beverly. "I've always been one of the luckiest mortals on earth—is n't that so, Jack? I have just received a wire from my sister, informing me that she and her husband will pass through Rothney Monday on Number Eight. Major Benham is home on sick-leave—inflammatory rheumatism, poor chap! He has been taking treatment in California, since he returned from Manila, but he is not satisfied with the results and is coming on East to try something different. He hastened his plans after my sister got Jack's letter telling her of my accident. So I shall let them pick me up on the way. Rather hard on my sister, to have a broken-armed brother added to her cares; but they say that the Major's little Jap servant is a

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remarkably handy fellow. I have been trying to persuade Mr. Fenton to go with us to Chicago, or at least to St. Paul, but so far I have n't made any impression on him."

"I should be only too glad to go if I could possibly spare the time," said Fenton quietly. His hand slipped from the chair-back to Beverly's shoulder. "I'll be in again at noon, Fred," he said, and bowing to the ladies he left the room. He was halfway down stairs when Mrs. Bowen, recollecting a commission that she had intended to give him, hurriedly followed.

"Poor old Jack!" sighed Beverly, adjusting the silk sling on his injured arm. "It must be very confining to be the one 'big' man in a little town. No doubt the wheels of progress would come to a dead stop in Rothney if Jack should take a day off. Positively, I lose patience with him. It's bad enough for him to let his activities be cramped into so small a sphere, but it's infinitely worse for him to be content therewith; and I've detected alarming signs of contentment in him during the past fortnight. Too bad! Why, if Jack Fenton had had ambition in any degree commensurate with his natural talents and early advantages, he might have been at the top of the legal profession in Chicago by this time, and probably United States senator, to boot."

"It is not impossible that his friends may send him to Congress as it is."

"I have heard some talk to that effect, but as I understand it, Jack utterly refuses the nomination.

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That 's the difficulty, you see — the dear fellow has n't a particle of ambition. I suppose he formed the habit of throwing away opportunities when he came out here to rope steers, eighteen years ago. Has he ever told you why he left Chicago? ”

The unexpected question startled Alice ; but she knew that no man, not even an Alfred Beverly, could wear a smile like this — half tolerant, half funmaking — if he spoke knowingly of a misfortune like John Fenton's.

“ What Mr. Fenton told me of the circumstances seemed sufficient to account for his wish to settle in the Northwest,” she replied. “ It was his own affair.” Her heart beat quicker with a sense of veiled but tangible meaning behind Beverly's words.

“ Oh, certainly,” said Alfred. “ He was the only loser by it. But when a likely young fellow leaves an unfinished law-course up in the air, throws over a fine business prospect, discards a host of influential friends, and runs off in a fit of pique, all because a pretty little school-girl has jilted him, what must one think? I confess that neither my sister nor I knew what to think; long as we had known Jack, we had never suspected that he could be bowled down by the whim of a coquette. Well, I am glad of one thing, at any rate — it did n't happen in my father's lifetime. It would have come hard on the dear old governor to see all his plans for Jack's future frustrated by Jack's own folly. He was Jack's guardian, and like a father to him.”

Alice had felt the quick approach of this climax, and when it arrived she evinced no shock. It was fortunate,

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however, that Mrs. Bowen's return to the room spared her the necessity of replying to Beverly's involuntary revelation, the tremendous significance of which she did not fully grasp until afterward, when she confronted it alone.

"You need n't send the horse for me this evening," said Mrs. Bowen as Alice was leaving. "Johnny's going out to Ward's, and he said he'd drop me on the way."

Fenton left Mrs. Bowen at the veranda steps and drove around to the stable to see Otto Erickson before continuing on his way to Ward's. As he approached the house, coming back, he saw Alice standing by the gate in the white paling-fence that enclosed the front yard. He instantly surmised that she was there for the purpose of speaking to him; he drew up at the gate, stepped from the runabout, and stood quietly waiting, his eyes upon the ground. Across the closed gate Alice looked at him with the new vision that had come to her since morning.

"Mr. Fenton, why did you not tell me the truth about Mr. Beverly and yourself? Why did you leave it to him?"

Fenton lifted sombre eyes to her face. He flushed slowly under the rapt earnestness of her gaze. "I was unwilling to do anything that would precipitate matters, or complicate them," he replied. "If my silence has been a mistake, I am sorry. I tried to act for the best. I took the chance that Fred might go away without

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making any definite reference to his past relations with me. When did he tell you?"

"This morning."

There was a short pause.

"Well! Has it really made any material difference?" demanded Fenton, almost roughly. "Has it changed your feeling toward Alfred?"

"There is nothing to be changed — it could make no difference, but it would have been better for you to tell me yourself. I think I had a right to expect that much. You — are very unlike your — brother."

He smiled grimly at the timid cadence of the final word. "That is quite true," he said. "Alfred and Maia have all the characteristics of their mother's people, while I — resemble their father. I shall never forget the last words their father spoke to me — they were his last words on earth. He said, 'John, if you are ever tempted to curse me for the wrong I have done you, remember that I have been punished enough through my love for you. You, the son whom I have not dared to acknowledge, have always been dearer to me than either of my other children; and you are far more *Beverly* than either of them.'"

Alice's bosom rose with a suppressed sob. A sudden fire leaped to Fenton's brain and danced in red sparks before his eyes.

"I'm a fool to tell you that!" he exclaimed, his voice thickened by passion. "You know I would never have told you a word about myself if I had known that Alfred was anything to you. I can't unsay it now, but —

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listen to me, Alice Delamere! I give you my word that Alfred's friends shall never have the slightest hint of the abominable truth. Alfred's *wife* will never be called upon to recognize the existence of his bastard brother!"

He turned and sprang into the runabout. His horse plunged forward, rearing.

Alice flung out both hands with an imploring gesture. "John!" she cried faintly.

He neither saw nor heard. In a moment the little runabout disappeared at the end of the cottonwood lane.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE SUPREME TEST

AT Beverly's urgent request Mrs. Bowen and Miss Delamere went to the station to see him off Monday evening. Number Eight arrived nearly on time; the instant it stopped, Maia Benham descended from the rear sleeping-car to the platform, seeing nothing and no one, in the first moment, but Beverly, whom she addressed as "Freddie." She overwhelmed him with rapid little questions in a sweet contralto key; she seemed unable to believe that he had not been permanently damaged by his encounter with that ill-mannered cyclone. In her hasty meeting with Mrs. Bowen and Alice she showed a brief glimmer of the same frank cordiality that made part of Alfred's charm, but she seemed even more self-absorbed than her brother and less blessed with sense of humor. Major Benham, still very military in the spine and shoulders, though helpless in the knees, limped into view with a stout cane on one side and the sleek Japanese manservant on the other. John Fenton, who had never met Maia's soldier-husband, was presented to him now and went up into the vestibule to shake hands with him. As Number Eight stopped but a few minutes at Rothney, little conversation was possible.

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"Jack," said Maia, as the signal sounded for the departure of the train, "I cannot thank you enough for taking such good care of Freddie. When I learned of his accident, it was the greatest comfort to know that he was in your hands."

"Oh, he's a trump!" said Beverly, sliding his arm through Fenton's. "The same old Jack — not a bit changed. We shan't let him lose sight of us again, shall we, Maia?"

And this was the picture that Alice Delamere carried away with her — Maia with her hand in John's, Alfred at his side, and John looking upon them both in the proudly sustained consciousness of the wrong that they must never know, yet looking upon them none the less with the kindness and affection of the elder brother who was "far more Beverly than either of them."

Fenton drove from the station with no particular destination in view and no wish but to be alone. Presently he found that he was following the same road that he had taken on that starry, perfumed July night after the hail storm.

He drove through the rosy dusk and far into the gray darkness, not wildly, as he had ridden on that other night, but restrainedly; not demanding largess from hope, but relinquishing all title to the gift. For once he was acting quite inconsistently, as any man has the right to do, once in a lifetime. Nothing could be less characteristic than for John Fenton to give up the woman he loved for any reason short of her own ex-

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plicit rejection; nothing could be farther from his habit of mind than to admit the claim of a rival before it had been tested by the severest competition. But the rival was Alfred Beverly, and in that all-important fact lay the secret of Fenton's inconsistency.

Alice had once loved Alfred. It was by no means unlikely that she still loved him. Her friendship for himself might have stood the test of his miserable confession, had Alfred not been involved; the dishonor of John Fenton's father might have been magnanimously overlooked, but not the dishonor of Alfred Beverly's father. Thus Fenton reasoned; and in practical fashion he tried to shape his own future course by the conclusion of the argument. He did not protest, even in the first bitter moment of renunciation, that he could not live without Alice Delamere — he knew he could do anything that *had* to be done — but he foresaw that this supreme and final test of his strength would mean the putting away of a love such as comes to no man more than once and to most men never; it would mean the denial of a desire that was passionate enough to defy every law of God and man, had it been permitted to dominate his action; and after the struggle was over there would be nothing left, no cherishing of Alice's image in his heart, no memories of her to brighten the dull and empty years. For she would be Alfred's wife. Fenton had once loved another man's wife, or had thought that he did, and he had not forgotten the ashen flavor of the forbidden thing. His love for Alice Delamere placed her so far above Norma Hirschmann and all other women, that he

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knew he should never approach her, even in thought, after she had given herself to Alfred Beverly.

The prairie solitude that had witnessed his determination to win his heart's desire now surrounded him in silent affirmation of its relinquishment. There was no sweet incense rising from wild rose and cone-flower, but in its place the sharp scent of bitter herbs crisped by sacrificial frost. The overcast sky showed only here and there a veiled star out of all its myriad host; off on the northern horizon, where Fenton had so often seen a single light shining, he now traced the faint outline of Jefferson Hayward's vacant shack. His heart went out across the stony silence that seals the new-made grave.

"A love that is worth anything has got to learn when to let go." The words came back to Fenton's memory, across the silence, like an answer to his wordless cry. He felt that Jeff was not so far away, after all.

It was past eleven o'clock when Fenton drove his run-about into the stable and walked up town to his room. A man was leaving Mr. Leroy's house, swaying slightly in his walk yet preserving a degree of portly poise. It was Edward Kenney, more intoxicated than he often allowed himself to become.

"Oh — hello, Fenton! Just the m-man I want." Kenney flung an arm across Fenton's shoulder with more familiarity than he would have shown in his sober moments. "Been up to your room twice s-since ten o'clock. I want to talk to you. Business — very important."

"Can't you leave it until morning? I'm dead tired

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to-night." Fenton stood passive in the grasp of the other man's arm. "I did n't know you were home," he added. "I thought you were still in St. Paul."

"Not s-supposed to be home. Nobody but Billy Hunter knows I'm in Rothney. F-foxy, ain't I? Come on over to the hotel. I've got to talk to you — can't leave it till morning."

Fenton turned and walked down the street with him. "What is the matter?" he inquired.

"Matter enough. I've got it all d-down in black and white. I've been at work all day, putting it in shape to show you."

Fenton said no more. He saw that whatever Kenney's trouble might be, it was no drunken hallucination.

Kenney steered their course from Bellevue Avenue to Fifth Street, thus approaching the hotel from the side. "N-not supposed to be home, you understand," he said in explanation, throwing open the door of the seldom-used Ladies' Entrance. They met no one on the narrow stairs, and saw no one in the upper corridor except Mrs. Bronson, who was passing wearily toward its further end with a pile of clean sheets thrown over her arm. Kenney led the way to his own suite in the front of the building and unlocked the door of the sitting-room, a large apartment containing much ornate furniture and permeated by a mummy-like atmosphere of innumerable smoked-and-gone cigars. The electric lights were all on, as he had left them when he had last gone out. A writing-desk stood open, covered with papers; on a table within arm's reach of the desk, were a bottle

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half full of whiskey, a carafe of iced water, and a glass. A newspaper lay open on the table, almost entirely concealing a dark, shiny object that lay underneath. Fenton's quick glance took note of all these details, without specializing any of them.

"Sit down, Fenton," said Kenney, seating himself before the desk and waving his hand to a chair near by. He took two cigars from his pocket and offered one to Fenton with elaborate politeness. "No?" he said reproachfully, when the latter declined. "C-can't smoke unless you do."

"Oh, yes, you can. Go ahead."

After looking vaguely from one cigar to the other for a moment, Kenney threw them both on the table, and selecting a paper from the heap on the desk he handed it to Fenton. "Read that," he said curtly; his manner seemed like an attempt to draw his loosened faculties together.

The paper was covered with figures in Kenney's neat running-hand, a list of notes drawn on St. Paul and Chicago banks, with dates of maturity and rates of interest. Their sum was large. "Why, what's all this!" exclaimed Fenton.

"Read on."

The remainder of the statement gave the securities for the notes. The money had been borrowed in the name of the Rothney Land & Investment Company by E. Kenney, Agent. Watching the reader's changing countenance, flushing cheek, and darkened brow, until the final line was reached at the bottom of the page,

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Kenney handed over another paper. "Exhibit B," he said, with a raucous laugh.

The second memorandum tabulated mortgages that had been negotiated by E. Kenney, Agent, on lands recently acquired by the R. L. & I. in Montana, and showed that several of the conveyances had been duplicated and their value twice collected by Kenney.

As Fenton read, there was no sound in the room but the sharp rustle of the paper in his hand. Then he straightened back in his chair, his face like a thundercloud from which his look flashed like lightning. "Ed Kenney," he said in a guarded tone that nevertheless had all the force of an explosion, "what in hell have you been doing?"

"Speculating," replied Kenney. He reached for the bottle, poured a glass of whiskey and drank it off.

"Speculating in what?"

Kenney silently tendered a bunch of letters typewritten under the heading "Homeseekers' Investment Company." Fenton gave a quick ejaculation. Only yesterday the news of this audacious land-swindle had reached him by telephone from the Minneapolis office of the R. L. & I., but no suspicion of Edward Kenney's connection with the fraud had been suggested. From his rapid perusal of the letters Fenton now learned that Kenney had been one of the Homeseekers' first promoters. "Well, I suppose you know what this means," said Fenton, tossing the papers back on the desk. "It means ten years at Burnside for *you*."

"Minimum sentence eight years, maximum twenty.

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"I'll probably get the maximum." Kenney picked up one of the cigars from the table, and after several ineffectual attempts to strike a match with his shaking hand, he finally got it alight. Fenton sat silent, his brows close-drawn. "Well, why don't you say something?" Kenney broke forth after a while. "Why don't you rip and tear—"

"What's the use!" Fenton hitched his chair forward and began a deliberate second examination of the papers which he had thrown upon the desk. "There's a lot of this money not accounted for," he said. "You did n't put it all into that Homeseekers' fraud."

"Oh — that's so." Kenney clamped his cigar between his strong white teeth and fumbled with the disordered contents of the desk. "I've got a list of disbursements here somewhere. I did n't finish it because my head began to go dippy; there's nine thousand dollars that I can't lay a finger on. Here's the list so far as it goes."

A light broke over Fenton's face as he read. "I see," he said, quietly; and again, after a moment, "I see."

"If the Homeseekers' had got away with the goods," said Kenney, "I should have cleaned up a cool hundred thousand myself. I guess that would have financed a pretty tidy campaign; I guess I could have cut a considerable swath at the primaries."

"Have you made a deal with Hartshorne?"

"No. I've been playing a lone hand."

"For how long?"

"About three months."

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"Did you hope to break the Hartshorne machine?"

"I rather thought I might. It was n't Old Nick I was after, though. I was after another man." Kenney turned in his chair and looked at Fenton with a strange smile. "The — the man I was after," he said; "the man I wanted to break, crush, wipe off the map, was yourself, John Fenton."

"You would have wasted your money, then. I'm not a candidate for anything."

"Oh, no, not a candidate!" laughed Kenney, hoarsely. "You're only the man behind the gun, the gumshoe boss who runs half the voters in the State without their knowing it. You're only the man who can get more followers into line in a minute than the rest of us could whip up in a hundred years. You're the man who has only to whistle, and his cohorts will come running like a pack of hounds to fawn upon him —"

"Quit! I won't listen to such rot."

"Yes, you will. You'll listen until I get through with what I've got to say." Kenney's tongue was beginning to trip and stumble; he found it difficult to keep Fenton's face in range of his swimming eyes. "I've a long score to settle with you, John Fenton. It began 'way back in '99, when I first came to Rothney. I wanted to be your friend then, but you thought I was n't good enough for you. If I offered you my hand you pretended not to see it. You've always stood in my way, blocked my plans, worked against me, tried to throw me down —" He broke off with an inarticulate oath.

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"We won't discuss our personal relations just now," said Fenton shortly. "The thing we have to consider first is the job you've done for the R. L. & I. with these notes and mortgages, and for yourself in the Home-seekers' deal. Do these various statements," he waved his hand toward the desk, "cover the extent of your speculations?"

"Yes, except two thousand I lost on the races at St. Paul last week, and the nine thousand that I can't put my finger on."

"Well, the case is plain enough, then. You are liable to arrest any minute, and you will have to give a pretty stiff bond. That's the first thing to provide for."

"I should have been arrested in St. Paul last night if I had n't got a girl of mine there to give the police a false tip that sent them chasing down to Chicago after me. She's a cool hand, that girl! She stood the detectives off and kept them guessing while I made my getaway. But they're b-back on the right scent by this time. I expect a call from Sheriff Dobbs to-morrow forenoon. There's no use in furnishing bonds, though. I may as well go to jail first as last." Kenney made a reckless but impotent gesture of both arms, as if already he felt the walls of his cell closing around him.

Something in the man's tone caught Fenton's attention. "You have taken an inexplicable course in this matter," he said, his eyes keenly scanning Kenney's

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face. "Why did you make all these facts known to me, of all men?"

"Well," Kenney avoided his look, knocking the ash from his cigar with a palsied stroke, "I suppose if you are called upon to testify against me, you 'll do it all right."

"I shall have to do it. But I would much rather not. It would have been better for you, too, if you had kept the whole thing to yourself."

"Fenton," said Kenney, after a short silence, "I did n't intend to cheat the R. L. & I.; no, by God, I did n't! If my plans had n't miscarried I should have squared with the banks and straightened up those mortgages. And the Homeseekers' boodle would n't have come out of the pockets of widows and orphans, either — it would have come out of Loudon B. Allingham."

"Allingham! Is he in it?"

"Deep as I am, only he 's got a dummy to protect him from legal prosecution, and I have n't. It was he who got me into it in the first place. He 's treated me like a dog, too, damn him. If I should go on the witness stand and tell all the truth, Allingham would go to jail as well as I, if there was any justice in the court. You ask me why I 've told you all these things. Well, I 'll tell you." Kenney paused, swallowing hard at the burning dryness in his throat; through the fog that obscured his mind, a strong emotion was struggling. "You see, my motive was to break your influence. It took money to do this, and I got the money the quick-

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est way I could, never doubting that I could make my accounts all straight before anything was discovered. I did n't intend to rob you of money, y' understand — not money, but power. And I wanted you to know exactly what I had done, and why I had done it, before I went to — to Burnside. I'd have skipped to Canada this morning if it had n't been for that." He laughed again, with a sound not pleasant to hear, and reached toward the bottle on the table. Fenton's hand intercepted his.

"Oh, let that whiskey alone! You're so drunk now that you see everything double. Take my advice; put these papers under lock and key and go to bed. After you have slept some of the alcohol out of your system you will take a better view of the situation. It's useless to thrash the matter over any longer to-night. I'll come back early in the morning."

"All right." Kenney's hand dropped like lead from Fenton's. In a dull acquiescence very different from his former manner, he let Fenton help him gather the papers from the desk and lock them away in a drawer.

"Is there anything else I can do? If not, I'll go. I feel that I must get a little sleep myself before I shall be in fit shape to tackle this proposition."

"There's nothing you can do."

"Good-night, Ed."

Fenton held out his hand; Kenney, his face half averted, ignored the gesture.

"Good-night, John."

Fenton left the room somewhat reluctantly, though



There was a sharp silent struggle

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he perceived the uselessness of prolonging the interview. "He will be a different man in the morning," he thought. "It will be possible to talk business with him then."

Leaving the hotel by the Ladies' Entrance, he had gone about a dozen yards when he halted sharply, remembering the dark, shiny object that had lain half concealed by the outspread newspaper on Kenney's table. He turned and went back, springing up the stairs two at a time. He threw himself upon the door of Kenney's sitting-room, fully expecting to find it locked; the latch yielded at once, however — and not a moment too soon. Kenney stood near the table, his left side toward the door; his eyes were closed, his lips were twitching convulsively; in his right hand he held the revolver, with the muzzle pressed against his right temple.

Instantly Fenton was upon him. There was a sharp, silent struggle; the men were a match for each other in strength, but Fenton, having the advantage of sobriety, succeeded in disarming Kenney without mishap. He laid the revolver back on the table, retaining a right-arm grip of his staggering opponent, while Kenney, breathing like a maddened animal, cursed and swore incoherently.

"What did you come back for?" were the first connected words that came from Kenney's lips. "How dare you meddle with my affairs? This is my affair, I tell you!"

"It is mine, too. I thank God I was in time."

Fenton was white as marble, but perfectly calm.

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He held the would-be suicide as in a vise, looking straight into his bloodshot eyes, taming him as he would have tamed a wild beast. At length Kenney ceased resisting the strength that he could not overpower.

"I thought better of you, Ed Kenney. You would have been less a coward if you had skipped to Canada this morning."

Freed at last, Kenney swayed and sank into the chair beside the desk. "I tell you there's no other way!" he cried desperately. "I will *not* serve twenty years in the penitentiary. I'll take my soul to hell with me now, and have done with it."

"And add the crime of self-murder to forgery and embezzlement. You are in no condition to realize what you are doing. When you come to your senses you will see that the only decent thing is for you to face the consequences of what you have done, and to face them like a man."

"I am the best judge of my own action. If you think that I am going to be arrested to-morrow, you're mistaken."

"You will be arrested to-morrow, and released on bail. This much I am prepared to answer for if I have to stand guard over you myself. What about Ambrose and Margaret? Did you think of them at all when you took that revolver in your hand?"

A spasm contracted Kenney's face. "Think of them? What else should I think of? I don't intend that my poor little Maggie shall see her father condemned as a felon. Better for me to be dead than that."

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"Not if you die by your own hand. You have done well by your children in the past. Don't turn against them now."

"They've turned against *me*," said Kenney, with another oath. "At least Ambrose has. It's all the fault of his schooling. God! How my head swims!" He clutched his forehead with both hands, his large frame collapsing in a heap across the desk. The strain had snapped; the drink-crazed brain that had been steering him toward self-destruction was now drifting derelict. Fenton, observing the change, saw that for the present it would be better to let the man alone. "You remember Kitty?" said Kenney, rousing slightly after several moments had passed. "My wife, Kitty?"

"Yes."

"She was the most religious woman you ever saw. She — she was s-so damn pious that I used to have a hell of a t-time trying to live with her. Yes, sir, that's a fact. She went to mass every morning and to confession every week. Think of it! Before I'd lead such a dog's life as that — led around by a dough-faced priest! She wanted the kids brought up just the same way. S-she made me promise that I'd send them to those Catholic schools in Canada — Ambrose to the Franciscans and Maggie to the Ursuline convent where she was educated herself. Well, I could n't refuse. Kitty was dying — dying in childbirth with the child dead beside her. I — I could n't refuse her last request — now, could I?"

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"Certainly not. You did quite right."

"Right? — right?" echoed Kenney belligerently. "Of course I did right. I'd like to see the man who dares say that I did n't always act handsome by my wife and children. But my own rights have been sacrificed. Bah!" He raised himself heavily. "K-Kitty was a fool. What did I marry her for, I'd like to know, except so that I might have a son to bear my name, and be a companion for me as he grew up, and take my place after I'm gone. And what did she give me? A boy who defies my wishes and tells me to my face that he's going to be a priest and nothing shall stop him. A priest! Bah! Those shad-bellied, goggle-eyed Franciscans have filled the boy's mind so full of their superstition and their second-hand knowledge of the world that now he despises his own father — me, a man of parts, a man of experience who m-might have taught him how to get something out of life! Curse him! Curse the whole monkish brood!" He clutched his forehead with a groan.

"If Ambrose has fully made up his mind to be a priest you may as well let him go ahead." It seemed that the very atmosphere of the room must feel the relief of Fenton's clear, sane utterance after Kenney's guttural stammering. "It's always a risk to turn a boy from his natural bent. But Maggie is a totally different proposition. You need never fear that she will adopt the religious life — she's too much like her father for that. And the child has always loved you dearly, Ed. Can you think of Maggie, and still claim

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that you have a right to put a bullet through your head?"

Kenney caught his hands from his brow and threw them out before him, clenched. "Oh, my God, my God!" he moaned. "My little girl — her heart will be broken whatever I do! I tried to tell her about it, Fenton; I wrote her a letter —" He jerked two envelopes from his breast pocket, one sealed and addressed to his daughter, the other unsealed and bearing the significant superscription, "To whom it may concern." "I told her that her old dad was in such a tight place he had no choice, but that she must n't think hard of him, no matter what anybody said about him after he was gone, but try to forgive him, and love him always."

He fell forward upon the desk, a heaving bulk of flesh and sense pierced by a sharp soul-agony; and for a time the silence was tortured by that most terrible of all sounds, the choked sobbing of a strong but broken man.

Fenton stood it as best he might, though paling with a kind of moral nausea. When he saw that Kenney was recovering, he stepped forward and laid a firm hand on his shoulder. "Come," he said, quietly. "Let me help you into bed."

Kenney shook him off. He kept one hand across his eyes while with the other he searched his pockets for his handkerchief; he wiped the tears and sweat from his mottled face, keeping it turned away. "Go — leave me," he muttered.

"Not unless you give me your solemn word of honor

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that you will make no further attempt on your own life."

"My 'word of honor'! I suppose you are trying to be witty at my expense."

"You know better than to think that. See here, Kenney. I understand your position better than I did at first, and I want to say this — a fellow who will work as you have worked to-day, putting his case in shape, deserves some help at the pinch; and if you will agree to act the man, I'll stand your friend whatever happens."

Kenney turned now in astonishment and looked at him, still shading his brow with his hand. "Why, you're the man I tried to ruin! I did it all to kill you politically. It can't be that you understand —"

"Oh, yes, I do, but that does n't cut any figure. It makes no difference whether you were trying to injure me or to hurt some other fellow. As the thing has turned out, you are going to suffer more than any one else. You're in trouble; and according to my notion the time that a man most needs a friend is when he's in trouble. The case is very bad, but I have an idea it is not hopeless. I believe we can get you out of this mess. If you'll do your part, you may count on me to the full extent of my ability and influence."

Fenton spoke with his usual business-like incisiveness; yet a light shone up through his earnest expression, like the reflection of sunshine from the depths of a clear, calm lake. Kenney remained staring at him for a moment from beneath the hand that gripped his brow,

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then dropped his arms upon the desk and sank his head upon them. When he lifted himself again, his inflamed countenance seemed to have regained something of dignity and self-respect. He got to his feet; putting both hands on Fenton's shoulders, he looked him in the eye.

"Is *this* your strength, then?" he said slowly. "Is *this* the reason why no man can beat your game?"

"What?" Fenton's forehead wrinkled perplexedly. "I don't know what you're driving at. But never mind." He brought his own hands up to the other man's shoulders and gave him a shake. "Get along to bed!" he urged. "To-morrow, at daylight, I'll take your auto, run up to Grantham, see Timmins and Markley and get them to sign your bond. I'll sign it myself, too. Just now, what you need is sleep."

"You're right," sighed Kenney. He saw Fenton's glance fall upon the loaded revolver. "Don't be afraid," he said. "You've spoiled my aim. I could n't shoot straight now if I tried. I shan't try — I'll face the thing instead." He swayed toward his bedroom door and stood with his back against it, groping behind him for the knob on the side where the hinges were. Fenton set him right and opened the door for him. "Oh, yes, of course!" said Kenney, laughing feebly with a dry little click in his throat. "That door does open out — I'd forgotten. Go, Fenton. You've done all you can — and I've done all *I* can. I've told you everything; you've seen my humiliation — I've shown you my soul stark naked. Now, *go!*"

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"You may trust me," said Fenton, quickly. He turned and left the room.

He went down the main stairway this time, and into the hotel office. Two commercial travellers, whiling away the time until the midnight train should be due, sat tipped back in leather chairs, with their heels on the cold steam radiator, exchanging anecdotes; their mirth had a drowsy quality in keeping with the lateness of the hour and the tranquillity of their surroundings. Billy Hunter leaned both elbows on the desk, joining in the conversation now and then. He was sleek and affable as usual, but obviously sleepy. He greeted Fenton pleasantly.

"Cigar, Mr. Fenton? Yes, sir, you *bet*. You smoke the *San Pedro*, don't you? The best mild straight Havana on the market. Here you are, sir." Billy rang Fenton's coin into the cash register and returned to his lounging attitude, looking seriously at the face that was bent over the alcohol lighter.

"Hunter," said Fenton between puffs, "you'd better stop at Mr. Kenney's room when you go up stairs and see if he needs anything. He's not very well." The words were spoken in too low a tone to reach the salesman, one of whom was still droning away at his funny story.

"I know *that*, Mr. Fenton," said Billy, adapting his tone to Fenton's and pushing his fat elbows further across the desk with a confidential inclination of his head. "I've been worried about him ever since he got back from St. Paul this morning. He has n't eaten any-

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thing. I took him up a bite of lunch with my own hands, and he would n't touch it. Do you know what's the trouble?"

"Yes, but I can't say anything about it to-night. Just look after him the best you can, Billy."

"You may be sure I will! There's nothing I would n't gladly do for Ed Kenney." Billy's eyelids turned pink at the edges as he spoke, but he smiled a cheerful response to Fenton's good-night.

Once alone on the quiet street, Fenton felt an intense reaction from the scene that had just taken place in Kenney's room. He had seen death in many forms, but this was the first time he had stood so close to suicide. The moral squalor of it sickened him. He felt again the struggle for possession of that revolver, and realized that a whole volume of possibilities had flashed through his mind in those few seconds. Suppose the weapon should be discharged between them, and one or both of them be shot? Suppose they should be found, locked in that wrestler's embrace? Suicide? — or murder? That might be the question. Well! The danger was past; the tragedy had been averted.

Fenton walked for half an hour before going to his room, but he slept as soon as his head touched the pillow, and wakened next morning at dawn, clear-brained and ready for anything.

CHAPTER XXX

THE PASSING OF CLARENCE

THAT day found nearly every farmer in Penfield County hard at work, threshing wheat. At Riverside men, horses, and machines seemed to feel the exhilaration of frosty morning, burnished noon-tide, and mellow afternoon, and did their work as if it were so much play. All day long the wheat poured from the separator into the sack, less plump and rosy-brown than it had been in better years, but still a fairly clean crop of Number One Northern; and all day long the glistening galvanized funnels of Dave Stanley's new wind-stackers blew clouds of yellow chaff into the azure sky. Two processions of bundle-wagons passed each other on the field, one bringing the sheaves to their last account, the other bearing the sacked grain to the railroad, where Mr. Stanley's cars lay on the siding. At intervals the monster separators, long-belted to their fierce little engines, sought new points of vantage, leaving behind them smooth plains of stubble and great buttes of straw. In former years the burning of Dave's strawstacks, on clear autumn nights, had lighted up the country for miles around; now, his extravagant methods were so far reformed that the waste of his fields, promoted to the dignity of a by-product, no longer spent itself in picturesque illumination.

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A company of threshermen known as "Thorndike's rig" had taken possession of Willow Branch. They brought their own cook-shack and made camp at the upper end of the field. In comparison with Dave Stanley's shining new wind-stackers and panting gasoline engines, Thorndike's equipment seemed almost prehistoric. The engine was a straw-burner, cumbrous and leisurely, rattling noisily at every joint; the straw was bucked by a rope between two ill-natured bronchos; yet if you gave the machine time enough it threshed grain thoroughly, and its proprietor was not often obliged to "pull in" early for lack of engagements. Mrs. Bowen had employed him in consideration of an old debt owed to her late husband.

Accompanied by Alice Delamere, Mrs. Bowen went down to the field to watch the threshing for a while. Mr. Thorndike, who was an oldish man and not strong, supervised the work without bearing an active part in it himself; following the custom of many years, he had taken a few of the first grains that came from the hopper, to "chaw on," and having reduced them to a flexible gum he was placidly ruminating, with one eye on the red-hot, voracious little straw-burner, when the ladies joined him. While Mrs. Bowen talked to the thresherman, Alice stood by silently, like a well-mannered little girl who knows she must be seen and not heard, her sentiments divided between apprehension of the sputtering engine, which appeared to be on the point of exploding any minute, and demure amusement at Mr. Thorndike's remarks. In her dainty blue frock, with

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her chestnut hair fanned into light golden waves by the wind, she unconsciously attracted many a sheepish sidelong glance from the bronzed young men who were forking the bundles from the wagon into the threshing-machine. Mrs. Bowen's gaze followed the slender rill of wheat trickling from the separator. "I'm not surprised," said the widow with her usual sturdy optimism. "I have n't counted on getting more'n nine or ten bushels to the acre."

"Nine bushel — that's about what you'll get, ma'am," chewed Mr. Thorndike, his countenance sympathetically grave. "Y' see, it's this way, Mrs. Bowen;" and the thresherman proceeded to check off, on the gnarled fingers of his left hand, the various adverse crop conditions that had prevailed throughout the season — late snows, late seeding, excess of rain in May, rank growth in June, and the sudden heat that had come like a furnace-blast in mid-July, cooking the grain in the milk. "We're gettin' as good as we had any call to expect," he said in conclusion. "It's the same all over Penfield County — an almighty stand o' straw, and almighty poor headin'."

After her conference with Mr. Thorndike Mrs. Bowen drove off to town to do her marketing. She invited Alice to go with her, but the girl reluctantly declined. "I am so nearly through with my 'job' that I think I'd better finish it," said Alice. "I am writing the last chapter of my novel, you know." So Mrs. Bowen drove to Rothney alone, and found the town all agog with the disclosure of Edward Kenney's embezzlement.

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More rumors than facts were in circulation; it was known that the sheriff had come at ten o'clock, armed with his warrant, and had returned to Rainsford without his prisoner; it was said that Kenney was too ill to be removed to the county jail; some people understood that he was at the point of death. Mrs. Bowen called at the office of the R. L. & I. only to find that Fenton had gone to Grantham on his second trip thither since early morning; afterwards she met Billy Hunter, who gave her a full account of the circumstances, dwelling eloquently on the efforts that John Fenton had put forth to save Kenney from immediate imprisonment. Billy had placed a deputy in charge of the hotel office and was himself in almost constant attendance upon Kenney, watching at his bedside like a faithful spaniel while the sick man alternated between profane raving and sodden silence. Billy did not know that Ed's apparently subjective cursing fell upon the man who had taken the revolver from him last night and who had since bound him by a solemn pledge to make all such restitution for his crime as lay within his power — as Fenton put it, to "do the decent thing." And in the silent intervals, when Kenney lay scowling at space and deaf to Billy's timid suggestions of this or that expedient for his comfort, the man's fever-burnt faculties still strove to account for the sovereignty of Fenton's will. As the result of his own attempt to break John Fenton's political influence in the community he now found himself personally at the mercy of the man he had tried to ruin; and while in his mad desperation he might not have

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scrupled to forfeit the bail furnished by Timmins and Markley, he knew that he neither could nor would violate a bond that bore John Fenton's signature. So here he lay, a parolled prisoner in his own bed, because, forsooth, this man Fenton had willed that he should do the "decent thing"!

Before taking off her bonnet Mrs. Bowen went to Alice's room, and dropping down in the nearest chair she recounted all that she had learned of the affair that had set Rothney in commotion. At first the girl listened mutely, shocked and pale; but as Aunt Julia's narrative brought out the part that Fenton had played in the affair Alice began eagerly asking questions, her eyes darkening and her cheeks flushing with pride and joy. Mrs. Bowen read the signs aright, and rejoiced in the confession so innocently and unwittingly made. As she rose to leave the room she laid one hand on Alice's sunny hair, lightly stroking it. "Johnny is a good man, my dear," she said simply. "I guess you might hunt the world over without finding many like him."

"There is *no one* like him!" exclaimed Alice; and then, seeing that Aunt Julia understood, she blushed scarlet down to the little round collar of her sailor blouse. Aunt Julia, being a wise woman, went away with no comment beyond a quiet smile.

Sitting with her chin dropped into the soft palm of one idle hand, Alice remained for a long time after Mrs. Bowen had left her, looking off across the brown September fields toward the town in which was being played

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the sordid, hackneyed drama of a man's greed and temptation and downfall. Many a man had gone the way of Edward Kenney ere this, but few had ever been met in the way by a man like John Fenton, a man so keen in judgment, prompt in action, and magnanimous in his single determination to right the wrong that had been done. "No one like him" — Alice's heart had spoken plainly at last. She saw Fenton no longer as the isolated victim of cruel circumstance, an exile in the midst of life, but as a dominant power for good in the lives of many other people, and working out the problem of his own destiny by the equation of his service to others. She saw him no more across the gulf, but close and dear — inexpressibly dear.

She aroused at last to consciousness of the manuscript upon the table before her. "Cease this hero-worship!" she adjured herself. "Stop dreaming and get to work! You know very well that it's what *John* would do in your place." Yet she lingered over his name with curved, parted lips that were sweet as the opening petals of a warm, sun-kissed rose. Then she pushed back her hair with a resolute gesture and seized her fountain-pen. Fortunately there was little more to be written about Clarence and Laura; Alice triumphantly scribbled "Finis" across the last page of the final chapter, just as Christine Larson rang the dinner-bell.

"Finis!" For Alice's novel, that had been all Summer in the writing, the time of harvest had arrived, the time for separating the good grain from the chaff, for grading and weighing the net product. The separation

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could best be accomplished by reading the manuscript straight through from beginning to end, and to this task Alice repaired immediately after dinner. She dreaded it as a genuine ordeal. While writing she had not often paused to read over foregoing chapters, and she was fully prepared to find the manuscript bristling with inconsistencies. With a sigh, she gathered up the story of Clarence and Laura and shuffled its pages together. It looked discouragingly bulky. Had the unkind genius of the season, while casting its baleful eye upon the crops of the great Northwest, sent a glance *her* way, too? Would she find her Summer's work repaid by "an almighty stand of straw and almighty poor headin'?"

"There is but one way to find out," she said to herself, "so here goes!"

She made herself as comfortable as possible, with a stool for her feet and a cushion for the back of her little cane-seated rocking-chair. As she read on and on, she found that her novel contained quite as many inconsistencies as she had expected; she was equally amazed by the excellence of the good passages — some of which she had so completely forgotten since writing them, that she could not have identified them as her own, if taken apart from the context — and the utter emptiness of the thinner portions, stretches of fluent stupidity which she would gladly have disowned. The chapters written under the direct influence of John Fenton's sympathy and advice were undoubtedly the best in the book, but following them came others that were perfunctory and forced, the creak of the machinery becoming more and

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more noticeable as the story neared its end. The scenes that should have been the strongest were generally the reverse, the slighter features being much better handled. The two best characters in the book were the over-worked secondary hero and an old woman who might have been left out altogether so far as her importance to the plot was concerned.

“It is a failure.”

At first Alice was benumbed by this inexorable sentence of her own better judgment; then came a throbbing pang and a rush of bitter tears. She was not a tearful girl — she never wept over trifles and rarely over real troubles — but this time she had good cause for tears, and it was well that she let the floods have their way. She weathered the storm with a sore, buffeted heart, but with a mind cleared and stimulated to new effort. Her made-to-order novel, while worthless as a whole, contained many detachable features that were too good to throw away. It now became her business to discover exactly how much there was of this salvable material. She turned over the manuscript, taking out chapters, pages or single paragraphs here and there and tossing the residue into the waste-basket. When she had finished, the basket was full. Did the little heap of salvage contain enough substance to make a book, aided possibly by wide margins, thick paper, large type and numerous illustrations? Alice's practised eye told her that it did not — the story must be entirely rewritten. For a moment her heart sank at the thought. She had labored long and faithfully to construct this novel,

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battling with discouragement, hoping against hope; could she find the strength to do the work all over again? If she sent the manuscript to her publisher, with all its imperfections on its head, it would be accepted willingly enough; there would be no risk involved in publishing any novel by the author of "Ardietta." As if actually fearing that at the present low stage of her self-esteem she might yield to the temptation, Alice laid hands on the waste-basket and carried it down the back stairs. Christine was not present to witness this tragic last appearance of Miss Ellice's basket; from the maid's room above the kitchen came the measured beat of a sewing-machine treadle and the drone of a weird Swedish song. Alice opened the stove, stirred the embers of the midday fire, and thrust in a handful of manuscript. Page by page, the greater part of her Summer's work went into the blaze, sending a merry roar up the stovepipe, while Alice conducted the incineration as attentively as if burning manuscript were her sole aim in life. When the fire had devoured all she had to give it, she walked to the door and looked out. How brilliantly the sun shone, and how the blue sky smiled! Down in the field Thorndike's machine rattled cheerily; off in the west rose spirals of brown smoke from Dave Stanley's engines. It was harvest, harvest everywhere — and Alice held an empty basket in her hands.

She went back to her room in apathetic weariness, undressed, threw on a *negligée*, and lay down. Sleep came almost immediately, the sleep of exhaustion and reaction. Her last thought was of John Fenton, and

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when she awakened it was to a nebulous impression of which he formed the nucleus. Then she remembered her manuscript—she had *burned* her manuscript. She sat up quickly, tingling with acute consciousness. The sun shone in, low and red, at the west window; the rattle of Thorndike's straw-burner, though still audible, sounded fainter than before.

While she dressed, Alice felt her spirits rising with unaccountable buoyancy. She saw that novel of hers, written so laboriously and destroyed so ruthlessly, as she had never seen it before; for the first time it stood revealed in its true proportions. And the good that was in it—there was a great deal of good in it, after all—had *not* been destroyed! Laura, good little heroine, had survived, and beside her stood a humbled and chastened secondary hero, ready to assume any subordinate duty that might be assigned him. Even the old woman, hitherto superfluous, appeared in a new and perfectly justifiable relation to the general plan. But Clarence was nowhere to be seen. Clarence had utterly perished.

Suddenly, in the vacancy left by Clarence, Alice discerned the outlines of another personality, invisible till now, though possibly present all the time, a character bound by none of the technical limitations of the ink-and-paper hero, a man with good red blood in his veins, a real *man* with a clear, practical brain and a strong, tender heart. Alice stretched out her arms toward the vision. She was glad that she had "failed."

CHAPTER XXXI

THE MAN

THORNDIKE'S crew worked late that evening; supper was over in Mrs. Bowen's dining-room before the threshermen came straggling up to their camp in response to the hoarse blast of the cook's tin horn. Far down in the field, Mr. Thorndike and Otto Erickson still stood near the engine, talking with a third man who had just joined them. Channing Doty, swinging in the hammock on the veranda, instantly declared the identity of the third man, and Miss Delamere, who sat near by, did not dispute the boy's statement.

"Yes, that's Mr. Fenton all right," said Chan, swinging energetically, while the hanging-rope of the hammock, saturated by night dews and morning frosts, emitted dismal groans. "And there's his run-about off to one side. He must 've driven in 'cross-lots from Ward's."

"Very likely," assented Alice. "He often comes that way." Her quiet tone betrayed no emotion; indeed, a strange stillness filled her soul at the thought that Fenton would so soon stand in her presence. She did not try to imagine what he would say when he came, or how she should answer him.

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The hammock-rope ceased its complaint as Chan stubbed his tennis shoe against the floor to stop himself. "Why, he's drivin' away!" ejaculated the boy.

It was true — Fenton had stepped back into his runabout, and was departing as he had arrived, 'cross-lots. Alice sent one glance after him, then rising quickly she turned and went into the house. Chan caught the expression on her face; he perceived that Miss Alice was disappointed — perhaps displeased — and he came tumbling out of the hammock with a bounce. "Bet I can catch him by the time he gets to the road, if I hot-foot it 'cross the flax-field," he thought. "Goin' to try for it, anyhow."

He sped away, his black-clad spindle legs and white tennis shoes twinkling through the stubble. He reached the road in time, but so out of breath that he could not speak. Fenton pulled up and regarded him in grave rebuke.

"What do you mean by running so fast? What is it?"

Recovering his breath with a gasp, Chan delivered himself of the daring fiction that he had invented on the way. He expected his word to be challenged, but it was not. After looking down steadily at the little mischievous-eyed rascal who stood boring one heel into the roadside dust, Fenton moved over on the narrow seat of the runabout and said, "Jump up, son. I'll take you back to the house," and to Chan's unbounded relief, said no more as he drove rapidly across the flax stubble to the cottonwood lane.

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The living-room at Willow Branch turned its face from the sunset, and already it had gathered enough dusk to set off the pulsing rays of the small fire that crackled briskly on the hearth. Against the pink glow Alice's figure was outlined in pensive pose, as she stood on the hearth-rug with her hands hanging listlessly clasped behind her, the toe of one rosetted black slipper resting on the polished brass fender. She lifted her head at sound of a step on the veranda — a step she had long since learned to know — and her heart beat faster at this sudden reversal of the sentiments that had filled her mind since she had seen Fenton driving away. He entered with his usual firm, decisive tread, tossing his gloves and hat on the table as he crossed the room; he advanced to the hearth-rug and halted like a soldier at attention.

“Good evening, Miss Delamere. Chan said you wished to see me.”

She withdrew the little slipper-toe from the fender and fell back a pace, her hands still clasped behind her. The firelight caressed the curve of her lifted chin; a dimple came and went upon her cheek, like the fleeting imprint of an elfin finger-tip.

“Chan must be a psychic expert, Mr. Fenton. It is true that I wished to see you, but I did not send him to tell you so.”

“What! Did the boy dare —”

“Don't be hard on him. Did he say that I sent him?”

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"Well — I believe his exact words were, 'Miss Alice wants to see you.'"

"Which was absolutely true," said Alice with another dimple. "I have been hoping that you might find time to come and tell me all about Mr. Kenney — and the R. L. & I."

"It is a disagreeable business," rejoined Fenton, coldly. "You must not trouble yourself by thinking about it." He looked like a man who had entrenched himself against all friendly overtures, and was prepared to stand prolonged siege.

"It is business that concerns yourself, is it not?"

"Naturally. When did you hear of it? But I suppose it is all over the country by this time."

"Mrs. Bowen heard it from Mr. Hunter this morning. Is it true that Mr. Kenney's illness is serious?"

"It is more nervous collapse than physical illness. He has been under a fearful strain, and drinking hard. I think he will be all right in a few days. When I talked with him an hour ago he seemed more like himself."

"Must he go to prison?"

"That is the question. He is now held on bail to await a hearing. If all the funds that he has misappropriated can be restored, dollar for dollar, there is a good chance that the case will not be prosecuted."

"Can he possibly restore everything?"

"I hope so. He has promised to make a full declaration of all his assets, and they are larger than I had

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supposed. He has a surprising amount of valuable personal property — diamonds, plate, and so on,— and some very good mining stock that I never knew he owned. I got Mr. Allingham by long-distance this afternoon, and we have agreed to make good any deficit that may remain after Kenney's settlement with the R. L. & I. We may take a mortgage on the hotel and leave Ed in possession so that he can continue in business. The details are not arranged as yet."

"I should not have thought Mr. Allingham capable of so much generosity."

Fenton's only reply to this comment was a grim hitch of the chin. He was looking down into the fire; he found it well for the preservation of his defences to keep his eyes from Alice's face. "Ed's friends have rallied around him very well," he said, after a pause. "Bob Timmins and Hugh Markley agreed at once to see him through. Even Billy Hunter would have been willing to pledge his last dollar on Ed's bond if it had been necessary."

"I have heard all about that bond," said Alice. "You took Mr. Kenney's automobile at six o'clock this morning, and went to Grantham to see Mr. Timmins and Mr. Markley; and you signed the bond yourself, too. You were back in Rothney in time to be with Mr. Kenney when the sheriff arrived. You have retained an expert lawyer to take charge of the case. And before all, the first thing you did was to keep Mr. Kenney from running away."

"Running away?" repeated Fenton sharply.

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"Yes. It must be that he had intended to leave the country. He said to Mr. Hunter, 'If it had n't been for John Fenton, I should n't have been here this morning when Sheriff Dobbs came after me.'" Billy had quoted his speech, minus Ed's profanity, to Mrs. Bowen.

Fenton smiled enigmatically. His face looked careworn, and its lines showed deep in the up-glancing firelight. "Hunter talks too much," he observed, addressing the ruddy birch logs. "I cautioned him to hold his tongue, but he is so upset by this whole business that he cannot be depended upon. Miss Delamere, your summing-up of the various things I have done sounds a little like an indictment. Do you think me an accessory after the fact? Do you think I am shielding a mischievous criminal?"

"Certainly not. But I cannot see that Edward Kenney is entitled to so much protection and assistance."

"In one sense he probably is n't. It remains to be seen whether he will profit by the experience. That's his lookout. He is to make full restitution to every one he has robbed; no one will lose a cent, except the loss that Loudon Allingham and I have agreed to share. We think, Mr. Allingham and I, that it is better for the credit of the R. L. & I. to keep its former financial agent outside the penitentiary. Besides this, Mr. Allingham has his personal motive for shielding Kenney, and I have mine. Mr. Allingham wishes to avoid close inquiry into his own share in the promotion of the Homeseekers' Investment Company, while I—"

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Fenton turned now, and looked at Alice steadily for a moment. "Kenney has two children, a boy of fifteen and a girl of twelve. Their young lives must not be maimed and embittered if there is any way to prevent it. So I've tried to save Ed for their sake."

"Mr. Fenton, I think you are the most generous man I have ever known."

The gently spoken words fell on Fenton's heart like lead. He raised both arms with a desperate sort of gesture, and folded them across his breast, again looking away from Alice, answering nothing. This seemed unresponsive, to say the least; but Alice, who, if she had gained naught else from her long and troublesome acquaintance with her sometime hero, Clarence, had at least learned how to take the initiative, promptly approached Fenton's defences from another direction.

"Will your own loss be very great? In making good the deficit, I mean?"

"Oh, no. It may be very small. I am not worrying about that. The thing that will affect me most is the necessary reorganization of the R. L. & I. The old company will be dissolved and a new one incorporated. Yes, this is inevitable. Kenney will be out, of course, and Mr. Allingham intends to withdraw. For myself it will be a good deal like beginning all over again, and at my age that is a little hard."

Alice felt that he unbent a trifle in the last few words. She waited for him to say more, but he relapsed into silence, his expression as inscrutable as ever. Very

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good! If he would not take her into his confidence, she would try taking him into hers.

"Don't you think that sometimes the best thing we can do is to begin all over again?" she asked. "Surely the R. L. & I. will be better off without Mr. Kenney; and it may be better off without Mr. Allingham, too."

"That is entirely possible."

"I know what it means to begin all over again. Writing a novel seems a small thing in comparison with organizing an investment company, but still it is n't an easy thing. My novel — the one that I have spent the whole Summer trying to write — has eventuated in total failure, Mr. Fenton." The smile on her lips seemed hardly in keeping with the words. Fenton bent a quick look upon her, and Alice perceived that she had made a small breach in his wall of defence.

"How do you know that the book is a failure?" he demanded. "Have you finished it?"

"Yes. I finished it this afternoon — in the kitchen stove."

"You don't mean that you burned the manuscript? How could you do such a thing?"

"It was the most brilliant thing I ever did in my life. It showed me exactly what ailed the story — I had n't been able to discover that before. It disposed of a worthless, wooden-headed hero who has caused me nothing but trouble from the first. And, now, like you, I am ready to begin again."

"You will rewrite the story?"

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"Yes. Or rather, I shall write another to take its place. It must be reincorporated, like the R. L. & I. It needs a new protagonist, for one thing. I think I shall try to work along the line of a definition that you gave me one day — the definition of a hero. Do you remember it? 'A man whose courage is always equal to his need.' I shall add to it, 'A man who helps everybody.' Don't you think that a novel with such a hero might be worth reading?"

"Assuredly, with you for the author." Fenton was trying with indifferent success to apply Alice's words to Alfred Beverly; he did not think of himself as a prototype. "But I am sorry about the manuscript that went into the kitchen stove. I can't believe that it deserved such a fate."

"Oh, yes, it did! It was trash. I own that I wept a little when I found that it was a failure. Then I rose in my majesty and burned the manuscript — not quite all of it, though; there were some good things that I saved for reconsideration. Then I went to sleep; and when I waked, the cobwebs seemed to have been all swept out of my brain. I saw everything plainly!"

She had conquered him at last. As his eyes drank the clear blue depths of hers, he was again her eager lover, with all his heart in his impassioned gaze. But his look changed in a moment, as he once more called up the image of Alfred Beverly and thrust it between himself and his desire.

"Oh, dear!" thought Alice. "He is almost as unmanageable as Clarence. What shall I say next?"

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And not knowing what to say, she looked down into the fire.

If she had manifested the depression that might have been expected after the failure of her Summer's task, Fenton would have known better how to express his sympathy, though his pent-up feelings were at the danger-point of pressure, but her look of supreme contentment put him at a loss for words. It must be the thought of some happiness apart from her literary career — some happiness to be shared with Alfred, no doubt — that made her smile thus in the very face of defeat. For a moment Fenton had all he could do to master the jealousy that sprang at his throat and choked him.

After a long pause, he began to speak of something that had been gradually shaping itself in his mind for the past two days. "Miss Delamere, I owe you an apology for the way I answered you the other evening when you spoke to me about Alfred. It was brutal, and I have been ashamed of it ever since. Will you forgive me?"

"Yes. I did not blame you for it. I — I understood."

He went on, the words coming faster, his tone low and constrained. "Before he went away Alfred made me promise to keep in closer communication with him hereafter, and to see him oftener if possible. But I wish you to know that I shall do this only so far as it can be done without causing annoyance or — or unhappiness to yourself, Miss Delamere. I can see how it

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might be more agreeable to you if I dropped out completely — kept away — effaced myself. And I am ready to do this, if it is your wish.”

She could not reply at once. She knew that she held the key to his earthly paradise, yet now that the time had come to unlock the gate she faltered, trembling.

“Mr. Fenton, I cannot answer you until I know exactly what Alfred has been saying to you about me. I think you are under a misapprehension.” She longed to look at him, but dared not, knowing how his eyes were scrutinizing her face.

“He said that you were engaged to him four years ago. He said that you broke the engagement on account of a misunderstanding, but that you are now good friends. He said that he confidently hoped to renew the engagement. Wasn’t he speaking the truth?” The question leaped from Fenton’s lips with sudden violence, his restraint giving way at last.

“It is true enough, except that Alfred has no reason to think that our engagement will ever be renewed, and no right to say that it will be.”

“You —” Fenton came forward a step; “you are not going to marry him?”

“Never!”

“Then you are free? Alice, you are free?”

She summoned all her courage and looked up at him, a look that unlocked paradise. “Yes, John, I am free,” she answered.

She was caught like a leaf by a storm-gust, and crushed to Fenton’s breast in an embrace that made her

The Man

feel as small and helpless as the wind-flower against the mountain-side. He said not a word; silently his lips held hers in long-drawn kisses that left her breathless, until in sheer bewilderment she hid her face from him. Beneath her cheek was the surge of his quickened breathing, against her bosom the heavy throb of his heart, and in her own heart, for all its startled wonder, was a perfect faith in him; for she knew that beyond the tempest of his passion lay the deep calm of a love that should never fail.

"Try — to be patient with me, Alice," he said huskily. "I love you so much, and I've wanted you so long — I've been wanting you all my life."

She slid her arms upward and clasped them around his neck.

"Say that you love me, Alice. I must hear you say it once."

She obeyed, the three words caressing his cheek in a whispered breath. After an interval that might have been an æon, or only the fraction of a moment — it seemed to comprehend all time — she drew back from him. He let her go reluctantly, keeping her hands in his. His face was flushed, and its lines showed the tense tremor of a great strength greatly moved. "And I thought that I must give you up forever. I thought I *had* given you up," he said slowly.

"You should have consulted me first. John —"

"My darling."

"There is something that I must say — about Alfred."

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"Oh, nothing more about him just now, please!
. . . Well, if it must be said, out with it!"

"I never really loved him. It was all a mistaken fancy. And—" She hesitated, her eyes downcast as she stood withdrawn from him at arm's length, her hands still clasped in his. The firelight showered golden glints on her hair and deepened the blush on her half-averted face. Once before he had seen her stand like this, against the crimson glow of an August sunrise. He shortened the distance between them by a step, bringing her hands to his breast. For the first time, he smiled with a lover's triumph. "I'm listening," he suggested politely.

"Alfred — never kissed me. Does that seem strange? Well, it's true, and I prefer that you should know it. I never could quite let him — it used to make him very impatient sometimes, but — oh, it's such a comfort to remember!"

Fenton caught her close, and lifting her chin like a fair flower-cup in the hollow of his hand, he drank deep of the sweetness that her lips had treasured for him only. And if to gain this one moment of life it had been necessary for him to travel again the wilderness-journey of the past eighteen years, he would have fared through the desert willingly, content with his reward.

THE END









